KAPPA

4TH ANNUAL SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED

MINA SHIRAKAWA

WORLDWIDE VENUS

ALSO INSIDE:

KONOSUKE TAKESHITA

WWE VS. NOAH

NJPW IN CALIFORNIA

MAY 2025
$7.99 US/$10.75 CAN
DISPLAY UNTIL APRIL 28, 2025
05
6 02648 00388 9

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED

PRESENTS...

THE PWI® PODCAST

HOSTED BY AL CASTLE & BRIAN R. SOLOMON

TWO OF THIS MAGAZINE'S MOST ESTEEMED WRITERS ARE JOINED BY A ROTATING CAST OF *PWI* CONTRIBUTORS AND INDUSTRY INSIDERS.

GET THE LATEST NEWS AND IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS YOU'VE COME TO EXPECT FROM *PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED*.

NOW AVAILABLE IN AUDIO AND VIDEO FORMATS!

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED

STANLEY WESTON
Founder (1919-2002)

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Kevin McElvaney

ART DIRECTOR
Laura Brubaker

DESIGNERS
Kevin Boone, Brandon Jones, Lindsay Archer, Marcelo Moreno, Nayoung Im, Olivia Dreon

SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER
Patti Nolan

SENIOR WRITERS
Harry Burkett, Al Castle

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Mike Bessler, Brian R. Solomon, Kristen Ashly, Righteous Reg, Jason McVeigh, Brady Hicks, Louie Dee, Andrea Hangst, Ashley Morris, Jake Joyce, Candace Cordelia, Scott Fishman, Walter Yeates, Karen Peterson, Francesco Mandolini, Pat Laprade, Lochlan McGrath, Paul E. Pratt, Nick Perkins, Tamaya Greenlee, Alfonso Lopez, Lyric Swinton

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Jennifer Orehowsky

CONTRIBUTING ARTIST
Jason Conlan

CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS
George Napolitano, Duane Long, JayLee Media, Earl Gardner, John Smolek, Issa Marie, Charlie H. Stern, Robert Starkz-Bellamy, George Tahinos, Anthony Pineiro Delgado, Steve Beyer, Basil Mahmud, Scott Lesh, Scott Finkelstein, Rob Brazier, Mikey Nolan, Mike Lano, Chris Grasso, Yuichi Kojima, Sarah Newman, Andre Beaupre, Jordan Williams, Dominique Dinh, Allie McPhetridge, Jon Washer, Jessica Torres, Samantha Crim, Ami Moregore

PRESIDENT
Steven Kotok

ADVERTISING INFORMATION
Kevin McElvaney
215-643-6385
pwi@kappapublishing.com

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED (ISSN: 1043-7576), Vol. 46, No. 4, 2025 is published nine times annually by Kappa Publishing Group LLC., 6198 Butler Pike, Suite 200, Blue Bell, PA 19422. Periodicals postage paid at Blue Bell, PA 19422, and additional post offices. Postmaster: Send change of address notices to: Pro Wrestling Illustrated, PO Box 37059, Boone, IA 50037-0059. Single copy price $7.99 U.S./Canada (£6.99 in U.K.). Annual subscription price $71.91 in the U.S., $88.56 in Canada and Mexico, and $130.41 in other countries. Not responsible for the loss or non-return of unsolicited articles or photographs, which will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope bearing the proper amount of postage. The entire contents of this magazine are copyright ©2025 Kappa Publishing Group, LLC. No part of this magazine may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. Publisher is not responsible for the accuracy or content of any advertisements appearing in this magazine, nor the delivery or quality of merchandise or services offered. No endorsement of any such advertisement is intended or implied. Advertisers and agencies assume liability for claims arising from the content of their advertisements. All WWE trademarks, logos and copyrights are the exclusive property of WWE and its subsidiaries. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. ©2025 WWE, Inc. All Rights Reserved. FOR ADVERTISING INQUIRIES AND RATES: (215) 461-0583. Printed in U.S.A.

WIND OF CHANGE

WITH PENNSYLVANIA'S WINTER still blowing strong, the term "wind chill" has returned to my daily vocabulary. There are days when the bitter sting of wind causes the ambient temperature—the one on the thermometer out on the porch—to feel like an utter fabrication. The wind-chill temperature better reflects what to expect when I step outdoors.

These two different metrics each have their uses. I don't want to get too much in the weeds with meteorology, as it is far from my area of expertise. But amidst all my ruminating about the "real" temperature, which numbers are most useful in discussing it, and the sometimes blurry line between perception and reality, I can't help but draw comparisons to pro wrestling.

For instance, what makes for a successful wrestling promotion in 2025? Is it live attendance or TV ratings? Maybe it's the 18- to 49-year-old demographic within said ratings. If you're going by those metrics alone, WWE is far and away the most successful promotion, while AEW continues to struggle.

What if we think in terms of bottom-line revenue? The industry-leading WWE continues to be wildly lucrative. Yet, for all the other numbers in decline, AEW's most recent TV deal with Warner Bros. Discovery puts the number-two promotion on a path to considerable profitability—the kind not seen outside of WWE since WCW's heyday. That, too, is a measure of success.

How about the "perception is reality" axiom? We can see how a red-hot promotion like WWE garners rave reviews in the present. Five or six years ago ... forget it. In 2019 and 2020, WWE was making heaps of money—thanks in large part to sponsorship deals and semi-annual events in Saudi Arabia—while the product was widely perceived as stale and difficult to watch. The talent pool near the top of the card felt shallow. With an increasing reliance upon "legacy" part-time acts, the median age of main roster main-eventers was on the rise.

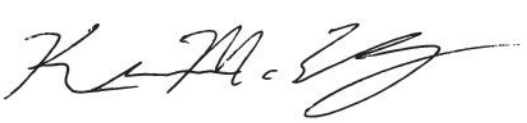
Fast forward a few years, and WWE has effectively switched places with AEW. It's not that Tony Khan's challenger brand was ever the top dog based on revenue or viewership numbers. What the company *did* have, however, was the approval of the public. Consider the 2021 *PWI* Awards, which were collected almost unanimously by AEW wrestlers. At that point, All Elite Wrestling was seen as the "it" league by diehard wrestling fans. It was also the place to be for free-agent wrestlers, with top prospects and veterans alike hitching their wagons someplace new and exciting.

Now, we see more wrestlers following in the footsteps of Cody Rhodes, departing AEW for WWE as soon as they get the chance. Jade Cargill, Ethan Page, Ricky Starks, and Penta saw opportunities to reach new levels of stardom in front of potentially much larger audiences.

No doubt, AEW's hot streak has cooled. Yet, it is still the most profitable competitor that WWE has seen this century. It's still attracting top-tier talent, from free-agent signings Kazuchika Okada and Will Ospreay to WWE expats Bobby Lashley and Shelton Benjamin.

AEW's TV product is complemented by solid monthly pay-per-views, with buyrates that have only increased since the company's "boom period" of 2021-2022. And, for all the talk of smaller live crowds, All In 2024 drew more than 45,000 fans to Wembley Stadium. Meanwhile, Grand Slam Australia in Brisbane sold more than 11,000 tickets. I could go on about AEW's interpromotional alliances, weekly live streams on MAX ...

Creative woes, public perception problems, and diminishing viewership are all issues that can be corrected. For the sake of this industry, which thrives amidst healthy competition, let's hope AEW and WWE both continue to fare well.



Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

MAY 2025

PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED

24
WORLDWIDE VENUS

She's captured the imaginations of fans in Stardom, New Japan, AEW, and beyond. Now, Mina Shirakawa reflects on some of her toughest rivals and reveals what we might see from her in the future.

BY KAREN PETERSON

32
INTERNATIONAL ALPHA

After bagging contracts from three major promotions on two continents, Konosuke Takeshita and his manager Don Callis double down on the Osaka native's ambitious goals.

BY AL CASTLE

38
WWE VERSUS NOAH

Shinsuke Nakamura and Omos descend upon Pro Wrestling NOAH's The New Year, launching a fortuitous new chapter in the alliance/rivalry between these two promotions.

BY JASON McVEIGH

44
AJPW'S NEW HOPE

Comprised of four bold, talented wrestlers, ELPIDA aims to bring All Japan to glorious new heights.

BY LYRIC SWINTON

50
CHAMPIONS IN JAPAN

This special photo section captures titleholders from numerous promotions at several of Tokyo's most esteemed venues.

BY ISSA MARIE

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

COVER PHOTO:
MINA SHIRAKAWA
(BY ISSA MARIE)

CONTENTS

DEPARTMENTS

Before The Bell

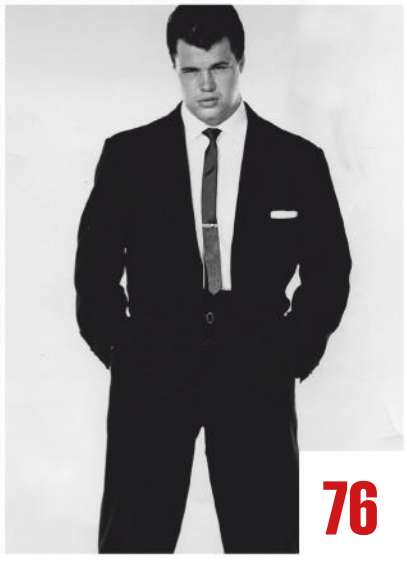
8 | Media Review
9 | Names Makin' News
10 | One to Watch
11 | A Bit of Fun
12 | Ringside
16 | Quick Count
18 | The Lockup
20 | Win, Lose, Or Draw

The Scrum

58 | TV Breakdown
60 | Mat, Stage, & Screen
62 | The W Column
63 | Righteous Wrap-Up
64 | About Face
65 | On Heels
66 | Brainbusters
67 | El Tirabuzón
68 | The Irish Whip
69 | Coast To Coast

The Finish

72 | Arena Reports
76 | The Way It Was
78 | Official Wrestling Ratings
82 | Drawing Blood



UP NEXT
Pro Wrestling Illustrated, "The WWE Era" Digital edition on sale April 10, print edition on sale April 29

STAY CONNECTED
www.pwi-online.com
X + Instagram: @OfficialPWI
Facebook: ProWrestlingIllustrated
MyFandom: @OfficialPWI

Editorial Inquiries:
pwi@kappapublishing.com
Customer Service:
custsrvc@kappapublishing.com

AND STILL...

YOUR FAVORITE WRESTLING MAG IS BETTER THAN EVER!

Remember the youthful rush you felt picking up a brand-new copy of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* from your newsstand or your mailbox? Well, that feeling can be yours again! Since 1979, *PWI* has been "The World's #1 Wrestling Magazine," and we're STILL bringing you the greatest wrestling from all over the globe in a gorgeous, full-color magazine.

DON'T MISS A SINGLE ISSUE!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND KEEP YOUR *PWI* COLLECTION GOING.

OPTION 1: **55% DISCOUNT OFF NEWSSTAND!**

☐ Please send me 9 Issues of PWI for $34.99

OPTION 2: **65% DISCOUNT OFF NEWSSTAND!**

☐ Please send me 18 Issues of PWI for $59.99

Please indicate method of payment:

☐ **Check or money order (enclosed and payable to Kappa Publishing Group, LLC.)**

☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard ☐ Discover ☐ American Express

Acct #_____

Expiration Date: ____/____
MO/YR

☐ New Subscription ☐ Renewal

YOUR NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY _____ STATE ____ ZIP _____

PHONE _____ E-MAIL_____

Please allow up to 8 weeks for subscription to begin. *Outside the US the annual subscription price for one year of 9 issues is $59.99 & two years of 18 issues is $109.99. Offer expires December 31, 2025.

A25PWI

SEND TO: KAPPA PUBLISHING GROUP, LLC., PO BOX 37028, BOONE, IA 50037-4028

Before THE BELL

MEDIA REVIEW 8 | NAMES MAKIN' NEWS 9 | ONE TO WATCH 10 | A BIT OF FUN 11
RINGSIDE 12 | QUICK COUNT 16 | THE LOCKUP 18 | WIN, LOSE, OR DRAW 20

HIROOKI GOTO sets up **ZACK SABRE JR.** for his signature GTR maneuver.

Photograph **©2025 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.**

DARK MATCH

A grisly new horror film features pro wrestling matches with life-or-death stakes.

Ayisha Issa, who stars in the movie *Dark Match* alongside Chris Jericho, attends the January 31 premiere in Toronto. PHOTO BY SHAWN GOLDBERG/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER GWF Hegel spent many hours contemplating what was "real" back in his time. These days, pro wrestlers have joined the debate in earnest, arguing that wrestling's physicality is as real as it gets in sports—even if the outcomes of matches are predetermined.

But what if the rivalries, enmity, and brutality of in-ring competition weren't all for show? Independent author Victor Rodgers examined the idea in his book *Chairshot: A Savage Sports Story*, and wrestling fans have surely debated the "what ifs" of imaginary shoot fights for ages. The new wrestling-themed horror film *Dark Match* goes all-in on the concept, and the results are downright scary.

Dark Match follows a scrappy band of independent wrestlers on an ill-advised trip to a show in a creepy, middle-of-nowhere locale. Plied with an array of mood-altering substances and other earthly delights, the men and women of SAW Wrestling ignore a plethora of red flags, eventually finding themselves at the mercy of wrestler-turned-promoter The Prophet (Chris Jericho). With the charisma of a cult leader and a penchant for the occult, The Prophet pits the ragtag pawns of the small-time promotion against bloodthirsty killers in a series of fatal bouts—encounters in which the winner is quite literally the last grappler with a pulse.

Directed by Lowell Dean and released via horror streaming service Shudder, *Dark Match* showcases the unmistakable talent of leading lady Ayisha Issa in the role of SAW champ Miss Behave. Issa's engaging and powerful performance is nicely complemented by Steven Ogg, who plays SAW old-timer "Mean" Joe Lean. Lean's character seems to evoke shades of Billy Bob Thornton, if the actor scored a walk-on role in the original episodes of *The Walking Dead*. Issa and Ogg find a worthy on-screen counterpart in Jericho as The Prophet. In a role that seems to have been custom-made for him, the nine-time world champion brings every bit of his decades of carefully crafted mic skills and wrestling psychology to this role, convincingly portraying a craven madman bent on bloodletting and vengeance.

In-ring action is front and center in *Dark Match,* even if the matches themselves are essentially subplots for a much larger story arc. In total, five contests unfold over the course of the film's 94-minute run time, with each bout following a sinister "theme" determined by The Prophet. The fight scenes are theatrical but gritty, reminiscent of combat films like the Jean-Claude Van Damme classic *The Quest* (1996) or the underground fight club thriller *Las Vegas Warrior* (2002). Just like a classic ECW-era Taipei Death Match (or a peek at the killing floor), there's plenty of blood and gore on tap, which is good for horror enthusiasts, but definitely not for young or faint-of-heart wrestling fans.

Of course, *Dark Match* doesn't really settle the question of what's "real" in the sport of wrestling. In fact, things get downright otherworldly by the end of it all. But the best themes of wrestling—from suffering and sacrifice to the dogged pursuit of fame and glory—all figure prominently. With a terrific cast, show-stopping special effects, and a good bit of star power, the movie is a thrilling romp of wrestling craziness.

We give *Dark Match* five out of five suplexes.

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the **TOP 10 WRESTLING-RELATED ITEMS** you've been talking about lately and our tongue-in-cheek reactions to each:

Jey Uso battles John Cena on the ring apron en route to his Royal Rumble victory.
©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

10. STING SAYS 2025 WILL BE THE FINAL YEAR HE APPEARS IN FACE PAINT.
The good news is that he hasn't ruled out appearing in a Sharpie goatee and googly eyes next year.

9. WWE CONFIRMS THAT STAND & DELIVER WILL EMANATE FROM THE T-MOBILE ARENA IN LAS VEGAS.
It's a dream come true for roster standout Lexis King, who has always dreamed of visiting the nearby Bellagio Patisserie Chocolate Fountain.

8. CHELSEA GREEN RETAINS THE WOMEN'S U.S. TITLE OVER MICHIN BY PURPOSELY EARNING A DISQUALIFICATION.
In retaliation, Michin pawned Green's entire collection of jewel-encrusted hats and invested the proceeds in Shiba Inu cryptocurrency.

7. DREW MCINTYRE REPORTEDLY STORMS OUT OF THE VENUE AFTER BEING ELIMINATED FROM THE ROYAL RUMBLE.
Insiders claim he was still peeved after learning that The Miz had used his favorite issue of *Tartan Quarterly* as a flyswatter.

6. CURRY MAN RETURNS ON CHRIS JERICHO'S MOST RECENT CRUISE.
The masked grappler addressed his previous hiatus, explaining he had been stuck in a large dish of chicken tikka masala.

5. CHARLOTTE FLAIR ELIMINATES ROXANNE PEREZ TO WIN THE WOMEN'S RUMBLE.
Commenting on her elaborate entrance attire, Flair explained that she was attempting to combine the design genius of Bob Mackie with the intensity of a pterodactyl on fire.

4. ADAM COPELAND ADOPTS THE NEW MONIKER "COPE."
Cope's longtime WWE rival went the other direction, adding additional letters to his name to become "Blandy Blorton."

3. TRIPLE H IS ANNOUNCED AS AN INDUCTEE INTO THE WWE HALL OF FAME.
Upon hearing the news, Ryback offered to take a break from TikTok debates to run the karaoke machine at the Hall of Fame afterparty.

2. WWE SCHEDULES JULY *SATURDAY NIGHT'S MAIN EVENT* SHOW AGAINST AEW ALL IN EVENT.
Competing for their share of the market, The Roku Channel will counterprogram with a marathon of *Thunder in Paradise*.

1. JEY USO WINS THE 2025 MEN'S ROYAL RUMBLE.
The victory is already paying dividends for Uso's career, as he is now slated to star in the upcoming WWE Films release, *The Marine 7: Standoff at Denny's*.

WE HEARD THAT!

FROM AROUND THE WRESTLING MEDIASPHERE, HERE'S A ROUNDUP OF INTERESTING QUOTES THAT HAVE BEEN ON OUR MIND.

"I started out this campaign last year with a simple slogan, a simple catchphrase if you will. And that's 'In Ali We Trust.' TNA has made the smart decision, placing their trust in me."
—Mustafa Ali to The Takedown *on signing with TNA*

"It's a huge step into the mainstream. It's an encapsulation of this moment in time, in which the disruption of the entire industry by Roman Reigns is hereby acknowledged."
—Paul Heyman to Variety *on Roman Reigns gracing the cover of* WWE 2K25

"I love WWE. I appreciate everybody there. They made me, they gave me my career, and I'm just appreciative of that. One day ... who knows? But I love my time in AEW."
—Saraya discussing a possible return to WWE with TMZ.com

"With the emergence of AEW in 2019, a shift happened. The landscape of the business of pro wrestling completely changed. There are more opportunities. Guys are making more money. AEW has been very good for the wrestlers, and it's just shaken everything up at all levels in every organization."
—Jon Moxley, speaking with Cincinnati's CityBeat on recent changes in pro wrestling

Now part of WWE's Independent Development program, Aaron Rourke makes his way to the ring for a New Year's Eve row at Beyond Wrestling.
PHOTO BY JON WASHER

LIVING THE DREAM

From training under **BRIAN MYERS** to locking up in Germany, WWE ID prospect **AARON ROURKE** is determined to be like the superheroes he saw on TV as a kid.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, "One To Watch" has sought to identify top prospects in the world of pro wrestling—performers on the cusp of something truly spectacular. This month's edition is devoted to Aaron Rourke, one of the standout indie wrestlers to be signed to the WWE ID (Independent Development) program..

"The WWE ID program truly changed my whole outlook on my time in wrestling and really rejuvenated me," said Rourke, a Northeastern indie stalwart who got "ID'ed" on a November episode of IWTV's *Wrestling Open*. "There were a lot of times where wrestling wasn't positive for me and I got down on myself. I am my own biggest critic—as I'm sure every wrestler is to themselves—so, sometimes, I felt like I was running on a hamster wheel with no real end goal in sight. When this program came to fruition and I was selected to be a part of it, I was overcome with emotion. This was a childhood dream that so many people told me would never happen for me, finally coming true."

Indeed, the 29-year-old Rourke is a lifelong pro wrestling fan, dating back to a formative experience with the WWF's Armageddon 2000 pay-per-view. "My earliest memory is when The Undertaker threw Rikishi off the Hell in a Cell onto a truck full of wood chips," he told *PWI*. "I remember thinking how crazy that was and that these guys were like superheroes! I pretty much knew then and there that I wanted to be a wrestler."

Rourke cites the influence of Rob Van Dam, Randy Orton, and "Nature Boy" Ric Flair. He also takes cues from many of the top female superstars to grace WWE rings, from Trish Stratus and Gail Kim to the Bella Twins and Michelle McCool. "I have always been a women's wrestling fan," shared Rourke. "And I would say the majority of wrestling I watch is women's wrestling."

Despite the self-doubt expressed earlier in our conversation, Rourke is the picture of confidence in the ring. Hailing from Long Island, New York, the self-professed "Evil Gay" boasts plenty of athleticism and personality to hold the interest of both fans and talent scouts.

Rourke, now a six-year veteran, first learned the grappling fundamentals at the Create A Pro Wrestling Academy under Brian Myers and Pat Buck. "There were so many people that were instrumental in me becoming who I am today," he recalled. "People like Kris Statlander, VSK, Max Caster, Johnny Clash, Bear Bronson, MJF, etc. They really took me under their wings and showed me the level that I needed to work towards to be great at this."

From those humble shores, Aaron Rourke sailed on to greater waters, collecting championships at Create A Pro Wrestling and Chaotic Wrestling. He competed in Germany's wXw, where he entered the World Tag Team Festival with Ava Everett as the Y2Kuties. Back home in the U.S., he's had memorable matchups with the likes of Bryce Donovan, Bobby Orlando, and Donovan Dijak.

Rourke likes to put away opponents with a Rob Van Dam-inspired split-legged moonsault—dubbed the Over the Rainbow-sault—as well as a variation of Charlotte Flair's Figure 8 leglock.

"I'm someone who strives for more, who wants to jump higher and break bigger and higher glass ceilings, who wants to reach for the biggest and brightest stars," said Rourke. "My goal is to inspire young LGBTQIA+ youth to chase their dreams and to not take no for an answer. If I listened to everyone who told me that I would never make it in wrestling, I wouldn't be where I am today."

NO WORDS BARRED

How many words can you find from the ultraviolent list below?

D	E	A	T	H	M	A	T	C	H	T	B	Q	X	A
S	W	D	E	B	R	A	B	Z	R	T	Q	L	R	R
D	K	S	W	D	E	S	F	R	U	I	A	V	S	O
S	R	C	E	G	D	N	E	R	K	X	M	B	Z	T
U	K	G	A	P	D	T	H	L	O	G	T	S	L	T
T	A	G	N	T	A	A	Z	Y	P	N	L	C	O	E
C	S	B	L	B	L	K	E	P	O	A	T	A	M	N
A	A	V	M	L	N	L	E	M	C	D	T	I	S	N
C	I	O	U	U	X	O	E	C	E	I	D	S	E	S
V	C	D	F	O	B	R	L	K	N	R	R	H	F	R
O	B	D	M	L	T	P	C	O	S	E	T	R	N	U
A	D	O	O	E	G	H	X	I	C	W	L	X	N	F
O	C	O	U	B	A	S	H	E	I	K	F	O	E	C
S	D	R	L	I	B	H	K	I	T	I	J	E	I	C
M	G	S	R	E	G	N	A	H	C	E	M	A	G	V

ABDULLAH
BARBED
BLOOD
CACTUS
CAGED
CHAIR
COLON
COMBAT
CRIMSON
DEATHMATCH
DOORS
EXTREME
FRONTIER
FUNK
GAGE
GAMECHANGER
GLASS
KASAI
LADDER
MOXLEY
ONITA
ROTTEN
SABU
SHEIK
STAPLES
TABLE
TACKS
TREMONT
VIOLENCE
XICW

EYEBALL GOUGERS

Guess the wrestler based on the super-magnified shots of their ring attire. (Hint: All photos were taken at a December 2024 NJPW event)

1.

2.

3.

4.

ORIGINAL PHOTOS BY KEVIN McELVANEY

ANSWER KEY: 1. Mercedes Mone; 2. Hiromu Takahashi; 3. Zack Sabre Jr.; 4. KUSHIDA

NEW BEGINNING

HIROOKI GOTO found a fresh start in the form of a long-awaited IWGP World title reign. Is this simply a reward for a career well done, or will it mean something more?

Hirooki Goto celebrates his IWGP World heavyweight title win—the first of his long and storied career—with his children. Look for Goto to outrank former champ Zack Sabre Jr. in next month's "Official Ratings."

©2025 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.

"THE NEW BEGINNING IN Osaka" was the perfect title for New Japan Pro-Wrestling's February 11 event, as longtime puroresu observers were surprised by some of the developments on the show. Foremost among these surprises was the main event, which saw **Hirooki Goto** defeat **Zack Sabre Jr.** for the IWGP World heavyweight championship.

Sabre, after all, possesses an international following on par with that of **Will Ospreay**, and his 2024 G1 Climax victory—followed by his World title victory over **Tetsuya Naito** on October 14—felt like a definitive change in course for New Japan. Only four months later, 22-year veteran Goto stopped Sabre's hot streak cold.

There's something to be said for the lonely quest of this ring warrior, who first challenged for the IWGP championship way back in 2007. Goto accumulated nearly every other accolade in NJPW, becoming a two-time IWGP Intercontinental champion and a five-time NEVER openweight champion. He also captured every available tag team title with a host of different partners, and emerged victorious in tournaments such as the G1 Climax, the World Tag League, the New Japan Cup, and the Young Lion Cup.

Headed into New Beginning, Goto defeating Sabre didn't seem to be in the calculus. However, if one factored in the recent death of his father and the narrow losses he had suffered as of late, it was easy to see how that equated to the loud support for Goto inside Edion Arena Osaka.

The 45-year-old Goto employed a young man's strategy at the outset. He engaged Sabre in a hit-and-run game, downing him with a shoulder tackle and delivering a clothesline in the corner. Sabre rattled Goto with some European uppercuts on the arena floor.

Back inside the ring, Sabre dominated whenever he could grapple with Goto on the mat, targeting his challenger's arm. Sabre executed a modified Michinoku driver, transitioned into an armbar, and, as Goto struggled against it, snared him in a triangle choke. The incumbent followed this with a Fujiwara armbar, and then grabbed Goto's other arm to apply the Clarky Cat scissored armbar.

With the crowd's encouragement, Goto reached the ropes. Sabre applied a sleeperhold, but Goto wouldn't be denied. He went for primal striking moves, such as kicks to the chest and a headbutt to the jaw. Sabre responded in kind with a series of slaps, which Goto countered with several more headbutts. He wore down Sabre with lariats, a vertical suplex into a sideslam, and his GTR finisher. Having slammed the champ twice, Goto pinned him after 20 minutes of action.

Will Goto's reign be significant? Will Sabre reassert his dominance? Or does this create an opening for an even younger star to claim the top spot?

One possible successor is **Yota Tsuji**. It was Goto's narrow loss to Tsuji in last

Jey Uso points at the WrestleMania sign after winning the 2025 Men's Royal Rumble match. *YEET!*
©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

year's New Japan Cup final that started the groundswell in his popularity. At New Beginning, Tsuji defended the Global title against another young star with momentum, **Gabe Kidd**. It was hard to imagine either competitor going down in definitive defeat ... and neither did. Despite Tsuji nailing Kidd with a Gene Blaster, neither man could make it to his feet before the 10-count.

Also on the card, Tetsuya Naito teamed with protege **Hiromu Takahashi** to defeat **The Young Bucks** for the IWGP heavyweight tag team belts. The surprising aspect was that Naito and Takahashi allowed **Matthew** and **Nicholas Jackson** to wrestle their usual style—basically a madcap, anything-goes, high-flying match—and amazingly kept pace with them. Naito even pushed Nicholas off the top so he and Takahashi could drop him with their version of the Meltzer Driver. The Japanese duo then hit the Americans with their heavy artillery: Takahashi's Time Bomb (fireman's carry into an Emerald Flowsion), a double-clothesline, and Naito's Destino somersault reverse DDT to score the win.

Will the Jacksons return to face the **Death Riders** in AEW? Or will their loss to Naito and Takahashi damage their confidence even more?

In other bouts, NEVER openweight champion **Konosuke Takeshita** pinned **Oleg Boltin** ... Junior heavyweight tag champs **Robbie Eagles** & **Kosei Fujita** defeated **Rocky Romero** & **YOH** ... **SANADA** pinned **Taichi** ... **The Great O-Khan** upset **Shota Umino** ... **Drilla Moloney** beat **Shingo Takagi** in the biggest win of his career ... **Hiroshi Tanahashi** pinned **Togi Makabe** as part of his Final Road Tour.

Congratulations to **Jey Uso** and **Charlotte Flair** for winning the Men's and Women's Royal Rumbles, respectively, on February 1 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. If Uso couldn't decide which titleholder to face at WrestleMania 41, World champion **Gunther** made up Jey's mind by attacking him on *Raw*. I'm sure **Rikishi** feels his son is ready to become World champion, but Gunther is thinking, *Not yeet!*

Likewise, Charlotte Flair didn't need to deliberate for long, as WWE Women's champion **Tiffany Stratton** challenged her on *Smackdown*. It's interesting that Jey and Charlotte gained so much momentum from their Rumble wins that the current champions felt they had to react preemptively to remain relevant.

At press time, another relevant question is this: Who will win at Elimi-

Isla Dawn showed plenty of personality and promise in her tag team run with The Unholy Union. Despite her recent WWE release, Harry Burkett bets Dawn will land on her witchy feet.
©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Ricky Starks showed up on a recent edition of *NXT* with all the star power accrued during his runs at AEW and the NWA. The Undertaker spoke highly of Starks on *Busted Open After Dark*.
©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

nation Chamber on March 1 in Toronto, and challenge Undisputed champion **Cody Rhodes** at WrestleMania? **CM Punk**, **John Cena**, **Drew McIntyre**, and **Logan Paul** had secured four of the six spots in the Men's Chamber, while **Liv Morgan**, **Bayley**, **Bianca Belair**, and the returning **Alexa Bliss** had qualified for the Women's Chamber as of press time. The latter winner will challenge Women's World champion **Rhea Ripley**.

Speaking of Bayley, she's been serving as quite the role model on *NXT*, teaming with Women's North American champion **Giulia** in a successful outing against **Roxanne Perez** & **Cora Jade**. But she went down hard the following week in a singles bout against Jade. Perez distracted her on the entrance ramp. Then, Jade planted her with a double-underhook DDT on the arena floor and again inside the ring to score a tainted—yet still huge—victory.

Did you see **Ricky Starks** show up out of nowhere on the February 11 broadcast? Starks pulled an **Ethan Page**, making a sudden appearance and touting himself as wrestling's hottest free agent. Starks heard plenty of "Ricky" chants during his debut promo.

On that night's *Busted Open After Dark* on SiriusXM, special guest **The Undertaker** said he was as surprised as anyone by Starks' immediate star treatment on *NXT*. Undertaker revealed he had met Starks at a gym nine years earlier, as he prepared for his match against **Shane McMahon** at WrestleMania 32. He added that Starks helped his wife, **Michelle McCool**, train for one of her surprise Royal Rumble appearances.

"I've always had great, great conversations with him," said The Undertaker. "He's such a good kid, such a respectful kid."

New roster additions usually mean some people will receive their releases, and several struggling WWE superstars were released in February, including **Karl Anderson** & **Luke Gallows** (again!), **Cedric Alexander**, **Blair Davenport**, **Isla Dawn**, **Elektra Lopez**, **Giovanni Vinci**, and **The Authors of Pain**, **Akam** and **Rezar**, along with manager **Paul Ellering**.

Many of these talents—particularly Davenport, Dawn, and Vinci—still have tremendous upsides despite being lost in the WWE shuffle.

And I only have two words for Cedric Alexander: **Hurt Syndicate**! The **MVP**-led faction is red-hot right now, coming off **Bobby Lashley** & **Shelton Benjamin** beating **Private Party** for the AEW World tag team title on the January 22 edition of *Dynamite*. Lashley, at 48 years old, and Benjamin, at age 49, have looked incredible, yet Alexander's dose of relative youth is exactly what they need. I want to see a reunion!

Lashley and Benjamin were equally impressive in their first title defense, against **Austin** & **Colten Gunn** on the February 11 *Dynamite*. The Gunns nearly closed the deal with the Shatter Machine, but Benjamin's running knee and Lashley's knee proved too much.

Eric Bischoff has already developed some grudges in his recent guest-booker appearances for Major League Wrestling. He initially fired **Bomaye Fight Club** leader **Alex Kane** at December's One Shot event, and current World champ **Matt Riddle** annoyed Bischoff by siding with Kane in the dispute.

Following Riddle's successful title defense against former World champs Kane and **Satoshi Kojima** in a three-way match at SuperFight 6, Bischoff punished Riddle by booking him to defend the belt against 39 other wrestlers at Battle Riot (where the Royal Rumble meets Bunkhouse Stampede) on April 5 in Los Angeles.

E, take it easy on the bro!

This 'n' that: Despite rumors he might sign with WWE, **Hijo de Dr. Wagner Jr.** has joined AAA ... The Mexican promotion already has plans for Triplemania on August 16, as Mega champion **Alberto Del Rio** is set to face **Latin Lover** (or a surrogate fighter) in a hair-vs.-hair match ... North American champion **Tony D'Angelo** defeated **Ridge Holland** inside a steel cage on the February 11 *NXT* ... **AJ Styles** returned at the

Royal Rumble and is competing for the Raw brand ... **Vince McMahon** is no longer under federal investigation for sex trafficking, according to his attorney ... **MJF** used a simple crossface to make **Dustin Rhodes** pass out on *Dynamite* ... Congratulations to **Joe Hendry**, who defeated **Nic Nemeth** for the TNA World title at Genesis, back on January 19 ... The casualties of a recent Anthem housecleaning at TNA included company president **Anthony Cicione**, who had replaced **Scott D'Amore**; **Josh Mathews**, social media director and former announcer; and **Christy Hemme**, who had just returned in October to work in marketing and social media, reported **Mike Johnson** of PWInsider.

I'd like to acknowledge three deaths since our last issue. **Black Bart**—who collected titles in Florida and the Mid-Atlantic, in addition to an unlikely run as World Class champion in 1986—passed away on January 9, only days after he entered hospice due to Stage 4 colon cancer. He began his career as **Ricky Harris** in 1975, assumed the Black Bart persona upon teaming with **Ron Bass**, and finished out his career on the WWF's lower mid-card. He was 76. For more details about Bart's career, check out my "Win, Lose, Or Draw" column in this issue.

Sweet Daddy Siki, an attraction at Maple Leaf Gardens in the 1960s and '70s, died of complications from dementia on December 31 at age 91. Despite choosing Toronto as his home, Siki was an international star, competing throughout North America—particularly in Calgary and Memphis—in addition to the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Bleached blond and charismatic, Siki sang his own theme song, "I Am So Proud of What I See." He helped train **Adam Copeland** and **Christian Cage** in the 1990s.

I also bid farewell to an ECW Original, **Hunter Q. Robbins III**, who died on January 11. He was 57 years old. Robbins, whose real name was Robin Hunt, managed **Sabu** in his ECW debut in addition to guiding the careers of ECW's **Super Destroyers** and **Suicide Blondes**.

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me.

NEWS ANALYSIS

HARRY BURKETT adds more asides regarding **HIROOKI GOTO'S** IWGP World title win, the Royal Rumble, and the careers of **BLACK BART** and **SWEET DADDY SIKI**.

NEW JAPAN'S GO-TO GUY

Whenever a younger wrestler captures a world championship, it is breathlessly speculated that it could mean the start of a new era. It almost never happens. That's often been the case in TNA, regarding Chris Sabin, Magnus (Nick Aldis), Eric Young, and others, for example. Zack Sabre Jr. is in too much demand for New Japan to rely on him long term. Goto, though, is proven and grateful for his position. No wonder they would go to Goto.

RUMBLE SURPRISES

I always enjoy the unexpected entrants of the Royal Rumble. This year, my favorites were TNA World champion Joe Hendry in the Men's Rumble and Trish Stratus in the Women's Rumble. If Hendry had to be eliminated quickly, he might as well get the rub from Roman Reigns. And Stratus looked fantastic for someone about to turn 50 this year, particularly against Nia Jax. I believe in Joe Hendry *and* Trish Stratus!

DESPICABLE DESPERADO

I happened to catch Black Bart on a 1985 broadcast of *Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling*. Fans had given "Avalanche" Buzz Tyler a T-shirt commemorating his visit to the Carolinas, so Tyler gave the shirt to host Bob Caudle for safekeeping. While Tyler was competing in the ring, Bart came out, grabbed the T-shirt from Caudle's hand, and ripped it apart. Tyler was furious. Those simple angles!

SIKI THE ENTERTAINER

I first saw Sweet Daddy Siki in the Winter 1975 issue of *Wrestling Picture Book* (which I highly recommend to collectors). With guitar in hand, he was behind a microphone performing at a nightclub. What a cool cat! He released an entire album on vinyl. Butch Reed, with his hair bleached blond and calling himself "The Natural" during his WWF run in the late-1980s, was obviously inspired by Siki.

THANK THE ACADEMY

In his annual silver screen-themed column, **AL CASTLE** examines some of AEW's most pressing challenges (and one of WWE's most troubling tropes).

By turning their backs on Bryan Danielson at All Out 2024, Jon Moxley and Claudio Castagnoli jumpstarted a new era of rulebreakers in AEW. While the Death Riders have their fans, Mox's most recent reign as World champ hasn't provided a needed boost to viewership.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD

IT'S OSCAR SEASON ONCE again, and it's unlikely that this year's Academy Awards ceremony will have the level of pro wrestling representation that last year's event did. The 2024 Oscars saw no fewer than three former wrestling champions present awards in various categories—Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, John Cena, and former WWE 24/7 champion Bad Bunny. If we're to beat that this year, "Timeless" Toni Storm had better get ready to put on her best gown.

In the category of Best Oscar-themed Wrestling Columns, the award goes to this edition of "Quick Count."

THE BRUTALIST

Whether a hero or a villain, it's essential that a wrestling promotion's world champion be someone who fans flock to see. And, unfortunately for AEW, Jon Moxley doesn't appear to be that person at the present time.

Now in his fourth title reign, Mox has held the AEW world championship for more days than anyone in the company's history. But, despite his unquestionable championship credentials, which include world title reigns in WWE and New Japan, there's little evidence that fans want to see Moxley at the top of AEW's cards right now. Since he captured the title in October, AEW audience metrics have hit alarming lows.

While Moxley certainly doesn't deserve all the blame for AEW's woes, he's not helping, either. Candidly: In his role as AEW's resident anarchist, Moxley is just unpleasant to watch. His bloodlust has been well-established for years, but it used to be targeted at bad guys who deserved it. Now, it's just gore for gore's sake.

The next time Moxley pulls out a plastic bag, I hope it's to discard this gimmick in the trash.

Shinsuke Nakamura levels an axe kick in the direction of NOAH's Ulka Sasaki. Al Castle laments Nakamura's continued reliance upon the poison mist to win matches.

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN

While Moxley—one of AEW's most recognizable faces—has been something of a letdown as of late, one wrestler has risen from relative obscurity among the masses to reside among the company's hottest stars. That man is Kyle Fletcher.

In 2023, Fletcher was best-known as one-half of Aussie Open, which earned the number-two spot in that year's "*PWI* Tag Team 100." With his partner Mark Davis sidelined by a wrist injury, Fletcher went at it alone for most of 2024. Along the way, Fletcher, working alongside and against United Empire stablemate Will Ospreay, earned a reputation as one of AEW's most exciting competitors. He parlayed that into a spot in the semifinals of the Continental Classic tournament.

With his previous alliances with Davis and Ospreay behind him, and with a prominent role in the Don Callis Family, Fletcher has the world in his hands as he enters 2025. And, with any luck, he may have a world title belt in his hands as he exits it.

WICKED

There is one thing that Moxley and Fletcher have in common with each other ... and, in fact, too much of the AEW roster. They're rulebreakers.

In the never-ending battle between good and evil that is pro wrestling, the scales have tipped way too far in the favor of evil in AEW. Take, for instance, December's Worlds End pay-per-view event. Of the seven matches featured on the main card, six were won by villains. So much for ending the year on an optimistic note!

The imbalance between the virtuous and the sinister isn't helping grow interest in AEW among wrestling fans who want someone to cheer for—and not just against.

The returns of full-fledged fan favorites Adam Copeland and Kenny Omega early in 2025 should help even things out. But, given its abundance of bad guys, AEW may need more than just a few good guys. It may need an exorcist.

CHALLENGERS

The returns of Omega and "Cope" also help fill another deficit in AEW's roster as of late: that of viable world title contenders.

With all due respect to the four men who have challenged for his AEW World championship since he won the belt in October, Moxley has yet to face an opponent that most AEW fans saw as a credible threat to his title.

For all his popularity, Orange Cassidy has been regarded as a comedy act for too long in AEW. Adam Page and Jay White may both have world titles on their resume. But, having languished in the mid-card for months, there was little reason to believe either of them was going to win the big one at Worlds End—much less in a four-way match.

The only man to challenge for the title in 2025, as of press time, is "Powerhouse" Will Hobbs. Hobbs has all the makings of a future world champ. However, this is the present. Not only could Omega and Copeland be instantly slotted in the pay-per-view main event with Moxley; both would be solid choices to lead AEW as the company's new standard-bearer.

And they're not the only ones. Kazuchika Okada, Will Ospreay, Swerve Strickland, MJF, and a few others would all make for believable threats to the world championship, because they all make for believable world champions.

THE SUBSTANCE

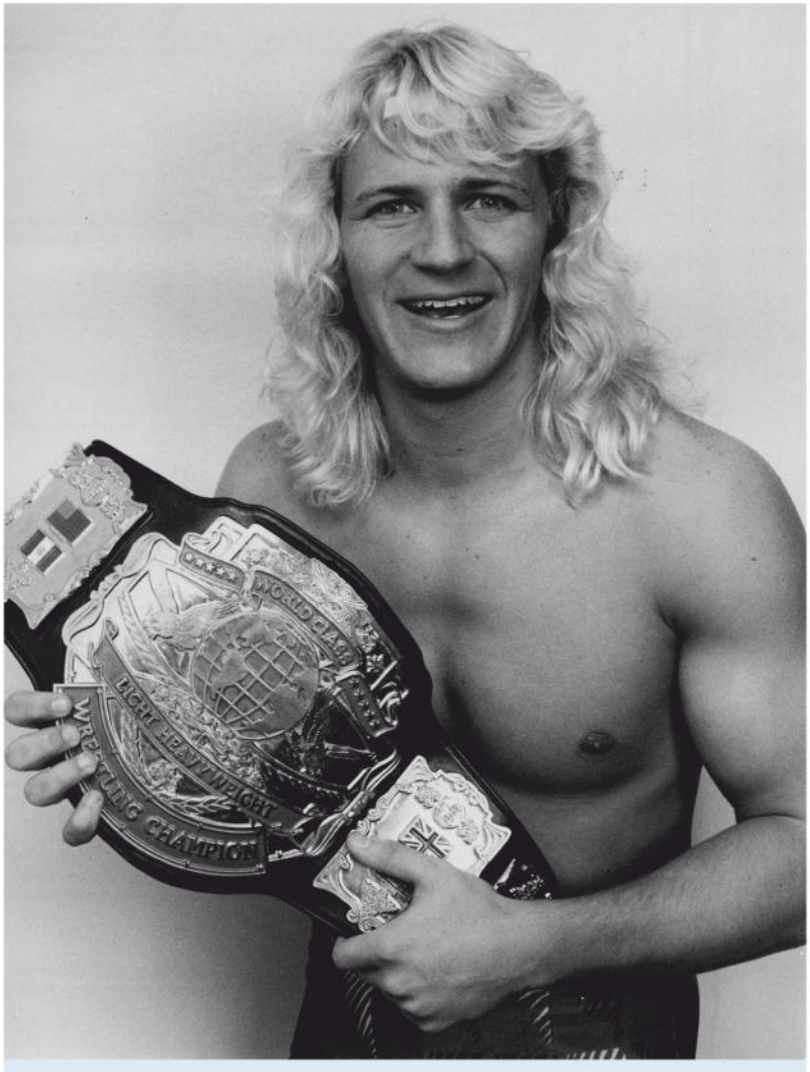
While AEW, to its own detriment, continues to push against some time-honored wrestling traditions, WWE continues to embrace one not-so-welcome wrestling tradition—that of the Japanese wrestler spraying opponents with a debilitating mist.

Although Shinsuke Nakamura changed up his act a bit upon returning to WWE action last fall, one thing he did not change was his reliance on a mysterious spew to blind his enemies. The reigning United States champion follows in the footsteps of other expectorating spectacles, including The Great Kabuki, Killer Khan, Keiji Muto, Tajiri, and Asuka.

So, what the heck is in the mysterious poison mist? We're not sure. But we're guessing it's available in WWE catering.

THE LAST OUTLAW

The 40-year wrestling career of **JEFF JARRETT** is unlike anything the industry has ever seen.



Jeff Jarrett poses with the World Class light heavyweight championship belt in 1988. Who could've predicted that, 37 years later, the incomparable Jarrett would still be contending for top championships? PHOTO BY BUDDY MYERS

TO GIVE YOU AN IDEA of how long Jeff Jarrett has been wrestling: He was named Rookie of the Year by the AWA ... in 1986. In fact, he holds the astounding honor of being the only person to challenge for both the AWA and AEW World titles. He's wrestled everyone from Tojo Yamamoto and Bill Dundee to "Hangman" Adam Page and Orange Cassidy. He's held tag team titles with partners from Mil Mascaras to Owen Hart; was a member of the Four Horsemen, the NWO, and the Bullet Club; and is an inductee to both the TNA and WWE Halls of Fame.

His recent major push in All Elite Wrestling has demonstrated Jarrett's chameleon-like ability to stay relevant, to move from one place to another and always manage to make an impact (to make a horribly bad pun), and to continue to be a vital part of the wrestling scene when many have been ready to count him out. In his quest for the AEW World title, he's touted himself as a 12-time world champion. This presumably covers his four WCW World titles, as well as his six NWA World titles, and most recently, his two reigns as AAA Mega champion.

In fact, he's the only wrestler to hold all three of those world titles. And when it comes to the venerable NWA title, the oldest world title in the sport, only two men have held it more times than Jeff Jarrett—Harley Race and Ric Flair.

This doesn't even take into account the three times Jarrett held what was then promoted as the "Unified World Title" in the USWA—the legendary Memphis-based promotion founded by his father, Jerry Jarrett. It was there that the young Jeff cut his teeth, straight out of high school, some 40 years ago. A proud third-generation wrestling professional, he's also the grandson of the beloved Christine "Teeny" Jarrett, who was a crucial part of the front office in Tennessee going back to the days when Nick Gulas and Roy Welch ran wrestling in that part of the country. Wrestling has been in his blood from the very beginning.

To be sure, Jarrett's certainly had his detractors, and some have felt that he was never the draw of many of his contemporaries; that he had what is sometimes derisively called "go-away heat." When he showed up in AEW, many were aghast. Fresh off a stint as a WWE executive and a member of the WWE creative team, it seemed like he had finally settled into a life after the ring. And yet, within the same week, he managed to both referee a match at SummerSlam 2022 and be one of the participants in the so-called "Last Match" of Ric Flair (the main event of the biggest independent show of that year).

Then came the full-blown comeback in AEW, and his eventual road to once again being a world title contender.

Jarrett struts across the ring during a recent bout with Claudio Castagnoli on *AEW Dynamite*. ©ALL ELITE WRESTLING

But you don't get the kind of success that Jeff Jarrett has gotten by accident, or even by luck alone. You have to be good, and you have to know what you're doing. It takes great skill to navigate the waters of the wrestling business the way he has.

He managed to springboard from his early years in Memphis into becoming "Double J" in the WWF during the New Generation Era. He won the Intercontinental title on six occasions—a feat only exceeded by The Miz and Chris Jericho. And when he burned bridges there, Jarrett regrouped and reinvented himself in WCW.

Then, when WCW went under, he eventually pulled off what he might wind up being best-remembered for, pooling wisdom and resources with his father to found the company that in many ways was designed to be the direct successor to WCW: Total Nonstop Action, TNA Wrestling. Through thick and thin, he positioned that company to be the closest thing WWE had to a competitor for years. And, when politics drove him out, he even made a play—failed though it may have been—to merge the company with the short-lived Global Force Wrestling. Even in his failed efforts, Jarrett has shown the kind of ingenuity and gift for reinvention that leads to long wrestling careers.

In recent years, New Japan Pro-Wrestling, Lucha Libre AAA, and even Game Changer Wrestling have borne witness to the force of nature that is Jeff Jarrett. In fact, it was in GCW that Jarrett was first dubbed "The Last Outlaw," the moniker that he's taken with him in his most recent bid for relevance in AEW. Not content to be just an in-ring talent after all he's accomplished behind the scenes, Jarrett has become a trusted adviser to Tony Khan, as well as AEW's Director of Business Development.

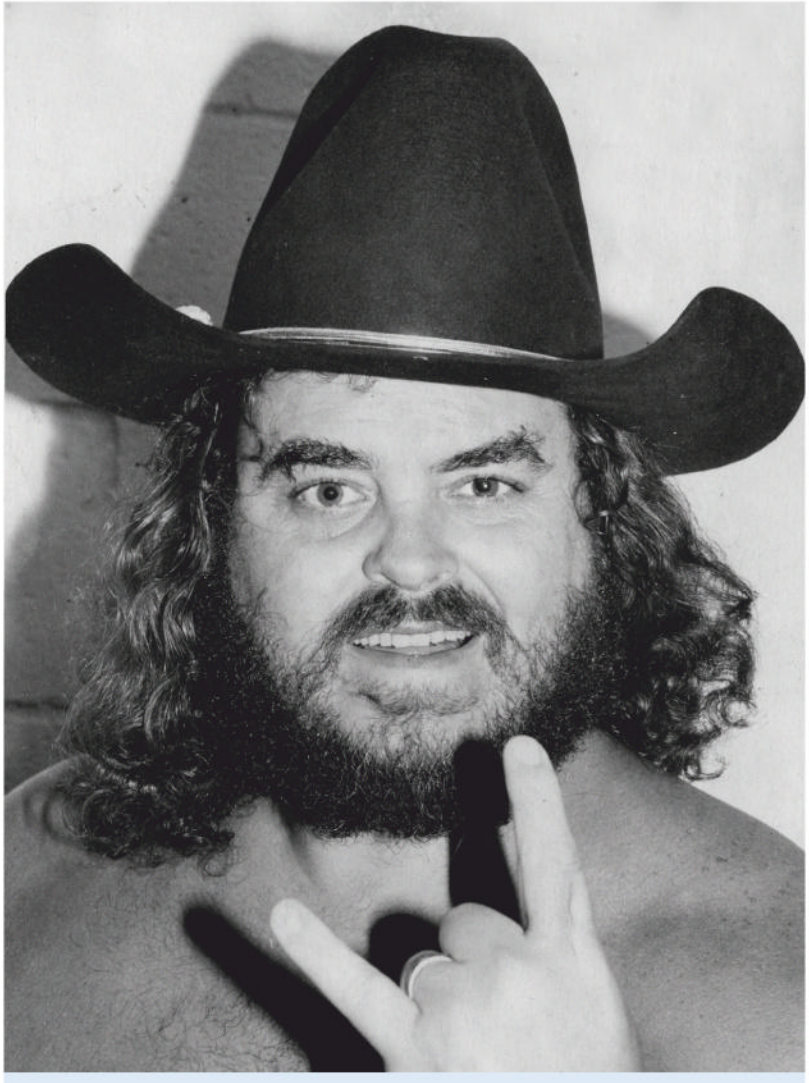
After a career spanning five different decades, "Double J" is still standing. In some ways, he's kind of a "last man standing"—one of the very few of his generation still out there getting it done in the ring. And these days, when so much of wrestling psychology has been jettisoned in favor of reckless high spots and "getting your stuff in," Jeff Jarrett has emerged as one of the best, most reliable workers currently plying his trade, even at age 57.

No matter what you may say about him, a Jeff Jarrett match in 2025 is almost guaranteed to be among the most entertaining, engaging, and best put-together on any card. He may not be a Ric Flair, a Ricky Steamboat, or a Bret Hart. But, these days, he represents a style that's hard to come by and somehow refreshing to see.

He may be calling this his last run, but I'll believe it when I see it. The fact that Jarrett is main-eventing in 2025—that he's bent on challenging Jon Moxley for the AEW World title, just as he once challenged Nick Bockwinkel for the AWA World title—speaks volumes for the tenacity and staying power of a man who, by sheer force of will, has made himself into one of the most important figures wrestling has known in the past 40 years.

TRIBUTE TO A DESPERADO

BLACK BART epitomized the journeyman wrestler: plying his trade from one territory to another, one of the industry's countless unsung heroes. It's time to sing his praises.



Black Bart was never meant to be a long-reigning world champion. Yet, he forged a respectable wrestling career—one highlighted by runs with multiple secondary championships of note.
PHOTO BY BILL APTER

HERE I LAY ME *down to sleep to wait the coming morrow, perhaps success, perhaps defeat, and perhaps everlasting sorrow.*

Pro wrestling's Black Bart actually had little in common with an English-born stagecoach robber of the same name, known for leaving poetic messages at the scenes of his crimes. While I could see Ricky Harris in his black hat and long coat in the role of outlaw, I can't imagine him as a gentleman bandit in the mold of "Black Bart" Charles E. Boles.

Yet I do think the above line of poetry, left by Boles after a stagecoach robbery in Northern California in 1877, applies to our Mr. Harris. It's almost an ode to the journeyman wrestler. For the decade following his 1975 debut, Harris knew he could face loss as easily as victory the next day—and perhaps his unconventional career choice would lead him to a sad end.

Harris probably figured he wasn't going to be the next Harley Race, Dusty Rhodes, or Ric Flair. All that was certain was uncertain income, thousands of miles yet to be traveled, and the inevitable toll on his body. Worldwide fame and riches weren't the allure. He had only the promise of more of the same.

He wasn't on the same track as, say, Hulk Hogan, whose physique and overall look almost guaranteed some kind of fame or notoriety, whether he grabbed a bass guitar or a pair of wrestling tights.

I believe there's more dignity in the one who persists merely for the joy of his craft, the camaraderie of his peers, and passion for the business. Sure, there are fleeting rewards—being recognized as someone from TV and maybe getting a free beer at the bar—though I don't imagine there were many groupies lurking near his hotel door at the Holiday Inn.

I watched Ricky Harris lose match after match on *Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling* and *Georgia Championship Wrestling* in the early-1980s. Harris had become acquainted with "Cowboy" Ron Bass, then the Mid-Atlantic TV champion, while working for Jim Crockett Promotions. Repackaged as Black Bart, Harris emerged in Florida, where Bass had turned on Dusty Rhodes and joined manager James J. Dillon. Bass and Bart—as The Long Riders—feuded with Mike Rotunda and Barry Windham, with the U.S. tag belts switching between the two teams several times during the first half of 1984.

When Rhodes ventured to Jim Crockett Promotions as its new booker, Bass, Bart, and Dillon followed, and The Long Riders picked up the Mid-Atlantic

Rugged, wild-eyed, and well-traveled, Black Bart embodied the spirit of the Old West.
PHOTO BILL APTER

tag team belts. I find it amazing that Ricky Harris could appear regularly on Mid-Atlantic TV, resembling a disheveled truck driver, and then return with a black cowboy hat as Black Bart less than two years later ... and no one seemed to notice it was the same person.

The old territorial system certainly had an Old West feel to it. Similarly, Joe Laurinaitis—as Joe Laurin—was a clumsy, bulky preliminary wrestler in the Mid-Atlantic before helping to revolutionize the business as Animal, one-half of The Road Warriors, in Georgia only a couple of months later.

After parting ways with Bass, Harris developed his own finishing maneuver, the Texas Trash Compactor legdrop off the middle turnbuckle. Viewed as reliable by booker Dusty Rhodes, Bart beat Ronnie Garvin for the National title, holding it throughout the summer of 1985, and won the Mid-Atlantic heavyweight title from Sam Houston, reigning for six months.

When I learned of Black Bart's death (age 76) on January 9, I immediately thought of his unlikely run as champion of the Texas-based World Class Wrestling Association in 1986—which had prompted surprise among myself and all the other wrestling fans I knew.

Considering that event occurred nearly 39 years ago, I pulled out some back issues to refresh my memory on the details of his World Class title reign. That year, World Class was in a tailspin following Mike Von Erich's bout with toxic shock syndrome, the death of Gino Hernandez, and Kerry Von Erich's career-changing motorcycle accident. And, stunningly, Black Bart's reign lasted only 23 days.

It seemed like a more significant event back then. I didn't realize at the time that former champion Chris Adams had walked out on the company and the World Class title got the Rio de Janeiro treatment, with announcers stating Bart had beaten Adams for the championship on the West Coast.

Fans were puzzled. Bart had been a mid-carder in Jim Crockett Promotions. Fritz Von Erich and World Class executives wanted their championship to be considered a world title, a distinction that *PWI* rightfully refused to bestow. And Black Bart was their choice? He wasn't even on the World Class roster before the fictional title change.

The best analogy is John Layfield's sudden metamorphosis from beer-swigging tag team wrestler Bradshaw to WWE champion JBL. Bart's ascension was a bit more credible, though it became clear—due to his loss to Kevin Von Erich at the Cotton Bowl on Columbus Day 1986—that he was meant to be only a transitional figure.

That was the apex of Bart's career. He went on to appear in Rhodes' Professional Wrestling Federation, worked as a preliminary wrestler in the WWF, and had a humorous run in WCW as one-third of The Desperados, a hard-luck trio also comprised of Dutch Mantell and Deadeye Dick ("Moondog" Randy Colley).

He rounded out his career in the Texas-based Global Wrestling Federation, where he—ironically—trained John Layfield.

Predictably, Rick Harris didn't enjoy a plush retirement, depending on autograph signings at conventions to help make ends meet. Plagued by diabetic and cardiac issues, Bart succumbed to colon cancer after, as Dutch Mantell claimed on his podcast, his medical insurance ran out.

It is said the other Black Bart, Charles Boles, adopted his nickname from a character in a pulp-fiction serial adventure. The villain was described as dressed in black and possessing long, unruly black hair, a large black beard, and wild gray eyes.

With all due respect to the cultured Englishman, that description fits pro wrestling's Black Bart much better. At least unofficially in my own mind, there is only one Black Bart ... the indomitable Ricky Harris.

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN 2025

24 MINA SHIRAKAWA: WORLDWIDE VENUS
32 KONOSUKE TAKESHITA: INTERNATIONAL ALPHA
38 WWE VERSUS NOAH: A FORTUITOUS RIVALRY
44 ELPIDA: AJPW'S NEW HOPE
50 CHAMPIONS IN JAPAN: SPECIAL PHOTO SECTION

Nina SHIRAKAWA

WORLDWIDE VENUS

TEXT BY KAREN PETERSON

With considerable charm, uncanny resilience, and a resolute belief in herself, the Stardom standout has become a global sensation

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

HEN NEW JAPAN Pro-Wrestling announced in 2022 that it would begin showcasing Stardom talent on its international shows, Mina Shirakawa became one of the first to be featured—and for good reason. An ambitious performer with plentiful charisma to match her staunch work ethic, "The Venus Of Wrestling" was seemingly built for the international spotlight.

Shirakawa made her first stateside appearance for New Japan at Rumble on 44th Street, teaming with fellow Cosmic Angels member Waka Tsukiyama. In 2023, she broke away from Tam Nakano's group after launching her own faction, named Club Venus, and became the one responsible for halting Saya Kamitani's consecutive defense record with the Wonder of Stardom championship.

In 2024, Shirakawa took a major career leap, not only representing Stardom on NJPW international tour stops, but also balancing regular visits to All Elite Wrestling and NJPW's British partner, RevPro. Notably, this was also the period when she challenged Mayu Iwatani for the IWGP Women's championship at New Beginning in Sapporo.

At age 37, Mina Shirakawa's global ambitions have only become more pronounced—her magnetic personality endearing her to more fans with each appearance. "I had my sights set on conquering the wrestling world from the time of my debut (in 2018), but it wasn't until I befriended Mercedes Mone in 2019 that I really solidified my future plans," she told *PWI*.

Imagine telling Shirakawa in 2019 that her new friendship would one day evolve into a friendly rivalry, culminating in a massive winner-take-all bout at one of wrestling's most esteemed venues.

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

Mina Shirakawa attempts to submit Mercedes Mone with the figure-four leglock during their big title-vs.-title match at the Tokyo Dome.
©2025 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.

Of course, such things don't come about by accident, nor do they happen overnight.

Shirakawa credits another international wrestling star, Jushin Thunder Liger, as the one responsible for inspiring her in-ring journey—motivating her transition from gravure model to professional wrestler. The Romero Special is one of the holds she wields as an homage to Liger. Other influences include Ric Flair, whose signature figure-four leglock looms large in Shirakawa's arsenal, and NJPW President Hiroshi Tanahashi. "Jushin Thunder Liger will always be a legend in my eyes, and whenever I watch Tanahashi wrestle, I am always incredibly moved," she remarked.

Watching Mina Shirakawa perform, one can see shades of all the greats she counts as influences. Yet, she is decidedly original. From her finely choreographed dance moves on the entrance ramp to the way she commands an audience in the ring, she is a singular performer—a pro wrestler who transcends linguistic and national barriers, inviting chants of "We Want Mina!" wherever she goes.

When Shirakawa first joined Stardom, she helped Tam Nakano launch Cosmic Angels, competing as a team in the 2021 Goddesses of Stardom Tag League. Some might say Nakano tops her list of eternal rivals: While Wonder of Stardom champion, Shirakawa challenged her for the company's World title; and, after their split, Nakano was the one who took the "White Belt" away from her. Stepping away from Nakano's side and striking out on her own with Club Venus marked a crucial turning point in Shirakawa's career. However, the time spent with Cosmic Angels was formative. Among other highlights, she got a taste of the bright lights of the Tokyo Dome as a second at ringside for Nakano's matches.

Known for her ribald humor and bubbly energy, Shirakawa would soon develop a reputation for her resilience and fighting spirit. In November 2022, her initial attempt at Saya Kamitani's Wonder of Stardom championship resulted in devastation

Shirakawa battles her friend-turned-rival Tam Nakano at Stardom's first-ever Philadelphia show, which took place during WrestleMania Week last year.
PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

En route to the RevPro British Women's championship, "The Venus" prepares to chop the incumbent Dani Luna.
PHOTO BY SCOTT LESH

when Kamitani's foot accidentally hit Shirakawa's face after a Phoenix Splash—leaving the challenger a bloody mess. Kamitani promised Shirakawa a rematch. And, five months later, "The Venus" made headlines, achieving a career milestone by defeating the longest running Wonder of Stardom champion.

Given the history between the two, Shirakawa's interest was piqued when Kamitani defeated Tam Nakano for the World of Stardom championship in December 2024. "I won the 'White Belt' from her, so maybe it's time that I do the same with the 'Red Belt,'" Shirakawa mused, setting her sights on Stardom's top championship.

The World of Stardom title isn't the only one of interest to Mina Shirakawa, who now leads the Empress Nexus Venus unit with former "Red Belt" holder Maika. Having shown up on AEW TV to support Mariah May (a founding member of Club Venus) last summer, Shirakawa broke down the Forbidden Door between AEW and Stardom, challenging Women's World champ Toni Storm at the event of the same name. Later, when May turned on her, Shirakawa challenged "The Glamour" for the title, too. Those frequent appearances adjacent Storm and May helped clear a path to more Stardom wrestlers competing in the U.S. and the U.K.

Shirakawa's own international popularity took her to England, where she defeated Dani Luna to become the RevPro Undisputed British Women's champion. After successful defenses against Luna and Lizzy Evo, an opportunity presented itself for "The Venus" to check two more milestones off her wish list: a singles match against Mercedes Mone and her in-ring debut at the Tokyo Dome.

"I had only been wrestling for a year when I first met Mercedes, yet she spoke with me as if we were professional equals. I was so touched by her friendly demeanor and heart-warming words," Shirakawa shared, recounting their first meeting in Japan. "I remember confessing that I wanted to wrestle against her, and, from that day on, it's been a dream of mine."

Astute fans will note that these two women shared space at the Tokyo Dome two years ago, before a captive crowd at Wrestle Kingdom 17. It was then that Mone made her New Japan debut, confronting IWGP Women's champion KAIRI (Sane) after the latter's defense against Tam Nakano. Shirakawa, still nominally a member of Cosmic Angels, stood at ringside for the occasion. "I was completely stunned, seeing Tam, KAIRI, and Mercedes walk down the entrance ramp, because their auras were only magnified by the Dome stage," said Shirakawa. "I was offered the opportunity to test drive the entrance ramp at the Dome, but I swore to myself that I wanted my first time to be when I finally make my entrance in a Tokyo Dome match!"

Shirakawa manifested those dreams. On December 14, 2024, at NJPW's Strong Style Evolved, she and Mone engaged in a verbal joust, setting the stage for a historic title-vs.-title bout. In one of the featured matches at the inter-promotional Wrestle Dynasty event, the NJPW STRONG and RevPro British Women's titles would both be on the line inside the Tokyo Dome.

A delighted Mina Shirakawa has the better of AZM and AEW's Anna Jay during an eight-woman tag bout. PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

January 5 came, and the fight was on. Shirakawa had her opponent well-scouted, countering attempts at her various signature moves and making a credible attempt at ending Mone's year-plus undefeated streak. After 14 minutes, Mone would take the match—along with the dual title belts representing the RevPro championship.

Shirakawa's optimism kept her strong despite the loss to her friend. "The entrance aisle at the Dome was like walking amongst the clouds," she recalled. "My heart was so incredibly full of gratitude to all the fans who helped me realize this personal goal."

"The entrance aisle at the Dome was like walking amongst the clouds," said Shirakawa, making her long-awaited stroll here with the two belts representing the Undisputed British Women's championship. PHOTO BY OCTOPUS STRETCH

Looking back on her journey thus far, including the obstacles and challenges that have made it interesting, Shirakawa was asked what advice she'd give to her past self. She cited living an unapologetically authentic life, being true to oneself, and tuning out the naysayers. She stressed the importance of self-confidence and openly expressing her own desires. "Don't be afraid to say who you want to become or what your goals in life are," she said. "Because you'll not only feel responsible for your own accountability, but when you finally accomplish what you set out to, it'll be even more satisfying!"

Despite her busy travel schedule, Mina Shirakawa still has ambitious plans—and major wishes left to fulfill. One of her biggest is to undertake (and win) a rematch with Mercedes Mone, having lost their fierce bout at the Tokyo Dome. "Because I believe she's the best in the world, and I want to prove to all the fans I am U.S. championship material," said Shirakawa. "I won't disappoint you next time."

In order to meet the biggest wrestlers in the world, "The Venus" doesn't just hone her craft in-ring by wrestling in different countries. She also applies her experiences learning English—both academically and for recreation—as a means to further expand her career opportunities. Although she did study English and American Literature in university, her conversational English is largely self-

"Don't be afraid to say who you want to become or what your goals in life are."

taught. Her interest in global pop culture and dance can be traced back to kindergarten, when M.C. Hammer and Michael Jackson were big names on the radio. Her exuberant dancing entrance reflects the influence international dance music had on Shirakawa's life, and her dance moves have been known to inspire others to join in with her.

Shuttling back and forth across the Pacific between domestic commitments and international show dates, the Tokyo native hasn't had much time to feel homesick. But she admits that she's felt some physical discomfort from all the time-zone jumping, which differs from her usual routine of Stardom's domestic touring circuits.

While overseas, Shirakawa took the opportunity to learn more about how wrestling internationally compares to Japan, and found the differences in fan interaction and business styles a rewarding learning experience. Though there were many restless nights, she worked diligently to venture out of her comfort zone. "I really wanted to put myself out there and get to know the people I was working with both in front of and behind the camera," she said. "I did my best to accept dinner invitations, too, even if I couldn't always follow the fast-paced English conversation. I felt sad at first, but I was able to overcome it because I realized what a great opportunity this was for me!"

Without a doubt, Mina Shirakawa's brilliant star will continue climbing higher and higher, winning countless hearts along the way.

"I genuinely believe that if you are passionate about your goals and really stand up for yourself, those lofty dreams that feel out of reach will find their way into your hands."

From Cosmic Angels to Club Venus and, now, Empress Nexus Venus, Shirakawa has endeared herself to fans across language and geographical barriers.
PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

PHANTASTIC PHOTO

BY ISSA MARIE

Backstage at the Tokyo Dome, **MERCEDES MONE** poses with the AEW TBS and NJPW STRONG Women's title belts, as well as the two belts representing the RevPro Undisputed British Women's championship. Be sure to check out our special photo gallery, "Champions In Japan," later in this issue.

NEW! VINTAGE MAGAZINE PACKS

We recently unearthed a treasure trove of print magazines from the *PWI* family, including ***Inside Wrestling***, ***The Wrestler***, ***Wrestle America***, and ***Sports Review Wrestling*** … there are even some ***PWI Almanacs*** in the mix.

For a limited time only, we're offering mystery bundles for an incredibly low price!

These excellently preserved mags—never previously purchased, owned, nor read—date back many years, with cover dates ranging from the early-1980s to the early-2010s.

HBK · McCool · JBL · Angle vs. Styles
PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED
RAW'S BATISTA
How Does He Match Up With His Inter-Brand Rivals?
RAW vs. SMACKDOWN vs. ECW vs. TNA vs. ROH
5 WAY FACE OFF!
DECEMBER 2008
$8.95

BUNDLE #1 — **CLASSICS & CURIOSITIES**

BUNDLE #2 — **ATTITUDE & AGGRESSION**

BUNDLE #3 — **TOTAL SURPRISES**

PRO-TIP: ORDER ALL THREE BUNDLES AT ONCE, AND YOU'LL GET AT LEAST 12 DIFFERENT EDITIONS!

GET YOURS NOW AT PWI-ONLINE.COM

THE INTERNATIONAL

ALPHA

TEXT BY
AL CASTLE

KONOSUKE TAKESHITA MAKES HISTORY WITH A TRIPLE CONTRACT

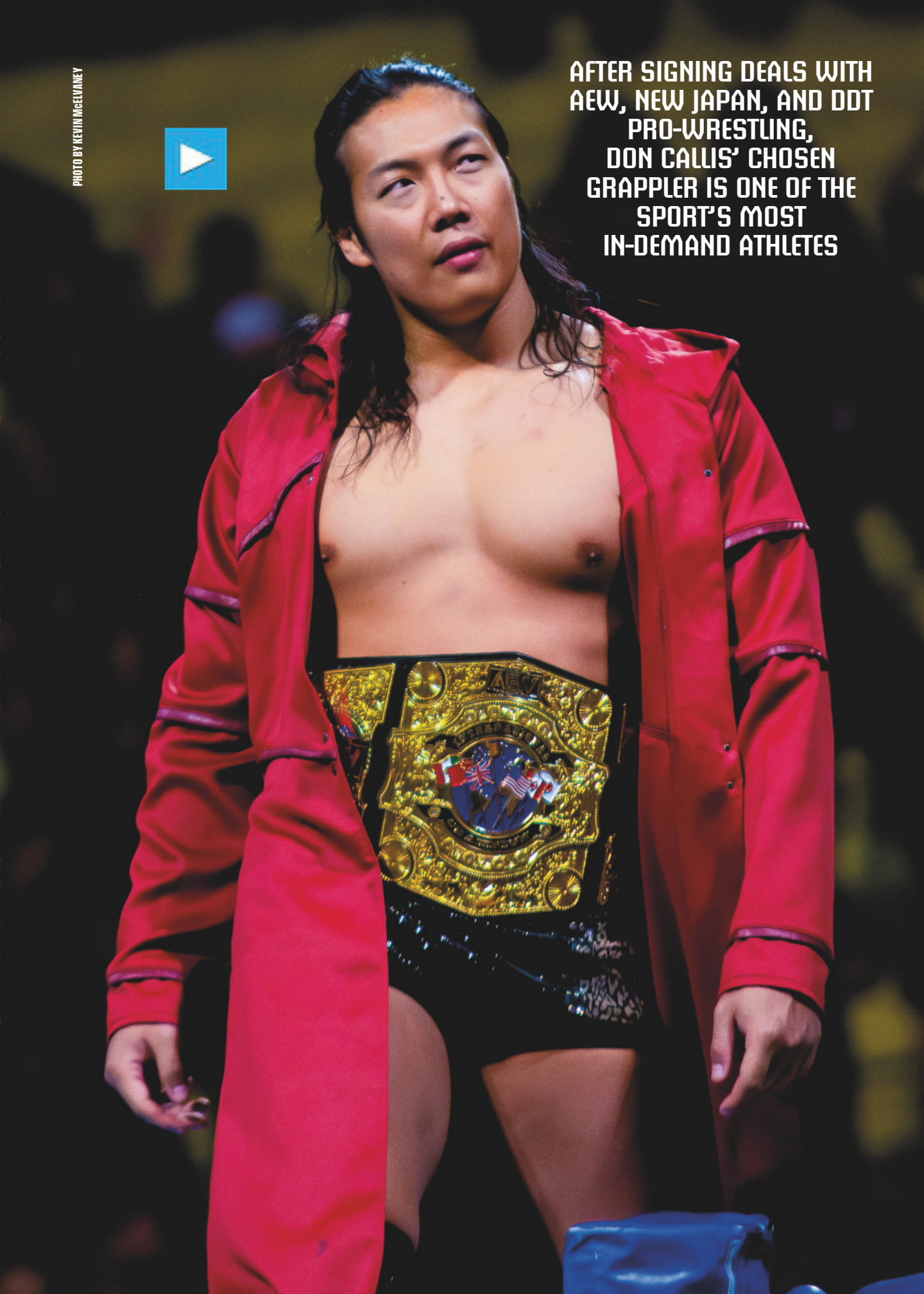


PHOTO BY KEVIN McELVANEY

AFTER SIGNING DEALS WITH AEW, NEW JAPAN, AND DDT PRO-WRESTLING, DON CALLIS' CHOSEN GRAPPLER IS ONE OF THE SPORT'S MOST IN-DEMAND ATHLETES

Konosuke Takeshita, flanked by manager Don Callis, poses backstage with his two championship belts—prizes representing the NEVER openweight and AEW International titles, respectively.

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

DOMINATING THREE DIFFERENT wrestling promotions at once may seem like a lofty goal for Konosuke Takeshita. That is, until you learn what his previous athletic goal was: dominating 10 different sports at once.

"There's a reason not a lot of athletes go into the decathlon. It's because it's really hard to be good at one thing. It's almost impossible to be good at 10," Don Callis said of his charge, Takeshita, who once excelled as a decathlete with hopes of competing in the 2020 Olympic Games. "I say it all the time, and I mean it 100 percent: This is the best athlete in wrestling right now. This is the best bell-to-bell in-ring wrestler in the world."

Takeshita is well on his way to proving his manager right. At the beginning of 2025, "The Alpha" found himself as a contracted talent in three major wrestling promotions across the globe—and holding championships in two of them.

Pushing limits is nothing new for Takeshita, who began his pro wrestling career at the age of 17, and, by 21, had won nearly every championship in his home promotion of DDT.

Takeshita still had his DDT deal in place when he joined the All Elite Wrestling roster in 2022. And it wasn't long before he joined the Don Callis Family.

In October 2023, the Osaka, Japan, native captured his first AEW title, unseating International champion Will Ospreay in a three-way bout at Wrestle-Dream that also included Ricochet. In the subsequent weeks, Takeshita lived up to his title of "International" champion by defending his belt in the U.S., Canada, and Japan, battling formidable challengers such as Josh Alexander, TJP, and Powerhouse Hobbs.

Then, in a gutsy move, Takeshita kicked off 2025 by putting his championship on the line in a winner-takes-all bout with NEVER openweight champion Shingo Takagi at New Japan Pro-Wrestling's Wrestle Kingdom 19 event.

Not only did Takeshita leave the Tokyo Dome with a second championship ... he also left with a third contract. Addressing the media after successfully defending both his titles against Tomohiro Ishii the following night at Wrestle Dynasty, Takeshita revealed that he had signed a one-year deal with New Japan. The promotion soon released a statement confirming that "Konosuke Takeshita has joined the NJPW roster in addition to AEW and DDT Pro-Wrestling."

News of Takeshita's achievement drew praise from those who admired his gumption, along with criticism from those afraid he may be spreading himself too thin.

Takeshita's view on the matter could best be summed up in four letters: YOLO.

"I'm just 29 years old. I'm still young. So I can do that," Takeshita said in English during a January interview with *PWI*. "Now, I live in the U.S. So, my first

Takeshita gouges the eyes of Shingo Takagi during a tag match in Long Beach, California. Though he's more athletic than most, "The Alpha" isn't opposed to fighting dirty now and then.

PHOTO BY KEVIN McELVANEY

Orange Cassidy is one of the hungry contenders Takeshita will need to pass en route to the AEW World championship. PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD

"I WANT TO BECOME AEW WORLD CHAMPION AND THE IWGP WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION AT THE SAME TIME ... THAT IS MY MISSION."

priority is AEW, of course. I can go back to Japan for one month and go to New Japan and DDT."

Callis, who was at ringside for Takeshita's consecutive-night Tokyo Dome title matches, said he's "not at all" concerned about "The Alpha" putting too much on his plate. With heavyweight dimensions, cruiserweight athleticism, matinee idol looks, and a bilingual tongue, Takeshita is no ordinary pro wrestler.

"I watched him beat Shingo one night, and I watched him beat Ishii the next. And he wasn't tired. He said, 'I can't wait to get back to America and be in another match,'" relayed Callis, who believes AEW's schedule just isn't enough to satisfy Takeshita's "itch."

"When you have wild horses, you've got to let them run, or they go crazy," Callis added. "If you've got a Lamborghini, you can't leave it in the driveway all the time ... He needs to be out on the track frequently."

But, in tackling the grueling task of holding down three different wrestling contracts at once, Takeshita is looking to do more than just stay busy. "I want to become AEW World champion and the IWGP World heavyweight champion at the same time," Takeshita said. "That is my mission."

At DDT, where he began his pro wrestling career more than a dozen years ago, Takeshita's goals are more systemic. "DDT is not a big wrestling company in the world yet," Takeshita said of the CyberFight-owned league founded in 1997. "I believe we have to grow DDT as a promotion."

Takeshita's vision is to make special appearances in DDT as a reigning double-world champion, and, in doing so, give exposure to some of the promotion's premier talent, like reigning KO-D champion Chris Brookes and Universal champion Yuki Ueno.

But first things first: The world championship belts in Takeshita's crosshairs currently reside around the respective waists of AEW titleholder Jon Moxley and IWGP champ Zack Sabre Jr. Takeshita has faced Moxley before, in a losing effort at last year's Double or Nothing pay-per-view,

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

when Moxley wore the IWGP title. To get another shot at Moxley—and at the AEW World title—he will have to work his way through a crowded field of worthy contenders that includes Will Ospreay, Kenny Omega, and Adam Copeland. Callis believes it makes business sense for Takeshita to cut to the front of the line.

"AEW is the best wrestling in the world, bell to bell. So, if that's what your company is—at least in large part—built around, then don't you want to be able to say that our champion is the best wrestler in the world?" Callis posed. "To have the top Japanese wrestler in Japan and the top American-style wrestler in America as your champion?"

He added, "When we get that shot, we'll take full advantage."

Takeshita has yet to face reigning the IWGP champ, but made it clear that "if Zack Sabre Jr. keeps holding the belt, I want to wrestle him. I want to challenge him."

For the time being, though, Takeshita has other priorities. "Now, I have the NEVER (openweight) title. So I want ... I *need* to focus on the NEVER title," said Takeshita, who most recently defended that belt against KUSHIDA at NJPW's Battle in the Valley event in San Jose, California.

Going forward, "The Alpha" said he plans on competing in "only big matches" for NJPW, including by participating in the company's annual G1 Climax tournament. With a win, Takeshita would earn a Tokyo Dome world title shot at next year's Wrestle Kingdom.

Yet, if he were successful in his ambition of reaching the top of three different wrestling promotions in two different countries, Takeshita would be in rarefied—but not unprecedented—air. In fact, he wouldn't even be the first wrestler managed by Don Callis to achieve that goal.

In 2021, Kenny Omega earned the moniker of "The Belt Collector" by simultaneously holding the AEW World title, the IMPACT (TNA) World title, and AAA's Mega title (one of the most prestigious championships in all of Mexico). At the time, Callis, who has known Omega for three decades, "didn't think [he'd] see anyone at that level" ever again.

"And then I saw Takeshita," Callis recalled.

Don Callis accompanies Konosuke Takeshita down the famous entrance ramp at the Tokyo Dome. PHOTO BY OCTOPUS STRETCH

Takeshita wallops KUSHIDA with a flying lariat. Callis notes that his charge moves like a cruiserweight despite a decidedly heavyweight frame. PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

Takeshita's running knee, as delivered here to Tomohiro Ishii, is one of the most feared strikes in all of pro wrestling.
©2025 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.

"I literally couldn't believe what I was looking at ... This guy is a once-in-a-lifetime athlete. He's better than (Kazuchika) Okada. He's better than Rikidozan. He's better than (Antonio) Inoki. He's better than (Keiji) Muto," Callis said, proving his worth as Takeshita's hype man. "When you watch Takeshita in person, it's shocking ... He's so big, and he should not be that graceful. He moves like he's 180 pounds, but he's 240."

Callis' two prize students have already met in the ring several times, dating back to when both worked in DDT a dozen years ago. The two most recently did battle at AEW's All Out event in 2023, with Takeshita coming out on top. But Callis suggested that wasn't the last time the "Alpha" would meet the Omega.

And, in his quest to rise to the top of the AEW hierarchy, Takeshita may face another worthy challenger—one from his own "family."

Callis notes that Kyle Fletcher shares a lot of similarities with the reigning International champion, and has shown some signs of "envy" toward his Don Callis Family stablemate. "I see a little bit of Kyle Fletcher looking at Takeshita with a little jealousy of where Takeshita is," said the veteran manager. "Takeshita is very much going around the world, doing his thing. And I think Kyle is another wild horse that you got to let run."

For now, Callis is inclined to keep his two stallions from running into each other. Instead, he's focused on Takeshita bringing new meaning to AEW's "International" title by having the champion continue to travel the world, racking up defenses and experience.

Takeshita's mission of world domination provides him the opportunity to achieve his goals across the two lands he calls home—the United States, where his major league wrestling dreams were realized, and Japan, where they began.

"I practiced for track and field before I became a wrestler," Takeshita recalled. "You know, the wrestlers I watched as a child were always giant and performed superhuman moves ... I believed that was what a wrestler should be."

To his immense credit, Konosuke Takeshita is a fighting champion who wants to prove his dominance in the ring, unlike some paper tigers who would rather not rack up title defenses. PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

WWE versus NOAH

A Fortuitous Rivalry

It's a new dawn, a new day, and, at NOAH The New Year, WWE wrestlers were feeling good

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH
PHOTOS BY ISSA MARIE

When it comes to working with other wrestling companies, WWE has traditionally lived by the adage that good fences make good neighbors. After the WWF's national expansion in the early-1980s, the company tended to behave—at least publicly—like other wrestling promotions didn't exist. There were exceptions to this, of course, such as the low-key alliances with ECW and the USWA in the 1990s. In almost all these cases, however, there always seemed to be some kind of ulterior motive—such as creating a pipeline of ECW talent for future excavation, or keeping Jerry Lawler happy. But if the industry leader was cold toward other North American companies, it downright ignored Japanese ones.

Recently, that has started to change. In a drastic shift from the traditional business model, WWE has been forging an alliance with Pro Wrestling NOAH. And, thus far, it has been a healthy and productive one—especially for the Japanese brand. To dig deeper into this partnership, *PWI* reached out to veteran WWE analyst, Thomas Pilliard, to get his expert take.

"What we're seeing is what I like to call the 'Levesque Effect,'" said Pilliard, in reference to WWE's Chief Content Officer. "First and foremost, Paul Levesque is a wrestling fan, and that includes Japanese wrestling. Look no further than some of his signings down at NXT: Asuka, Shinsuke Nakamura, KENTA ... the list goes on. Levesque has a respect for Japanese wrestling's place in the industry, and we're seeing that in WWE's relationship with NOAH."

Having respect for Japanese wrestling is one thing, but it has been WWE's commitment to Pro Wrestling NOAH that has been the most pleasant surprise. Rather than simply pay lip service, WWE has dispatched its own contracted talent to appear on NOAH events. At NOAH The New Year 2025, WWE wrestlers made their presence felt in memorable fashion.

When Jack Morris announced that he had a big surprise planned for January 1, no one realized how literal he was

"What we're seeing is what I like to call the 'Levesque Effect.'"

Shinsuke Nakamura makes his second appearance for Pro Wrestling NOAH as a WWE-contracted talent, this time bringing the United States title belt with him.

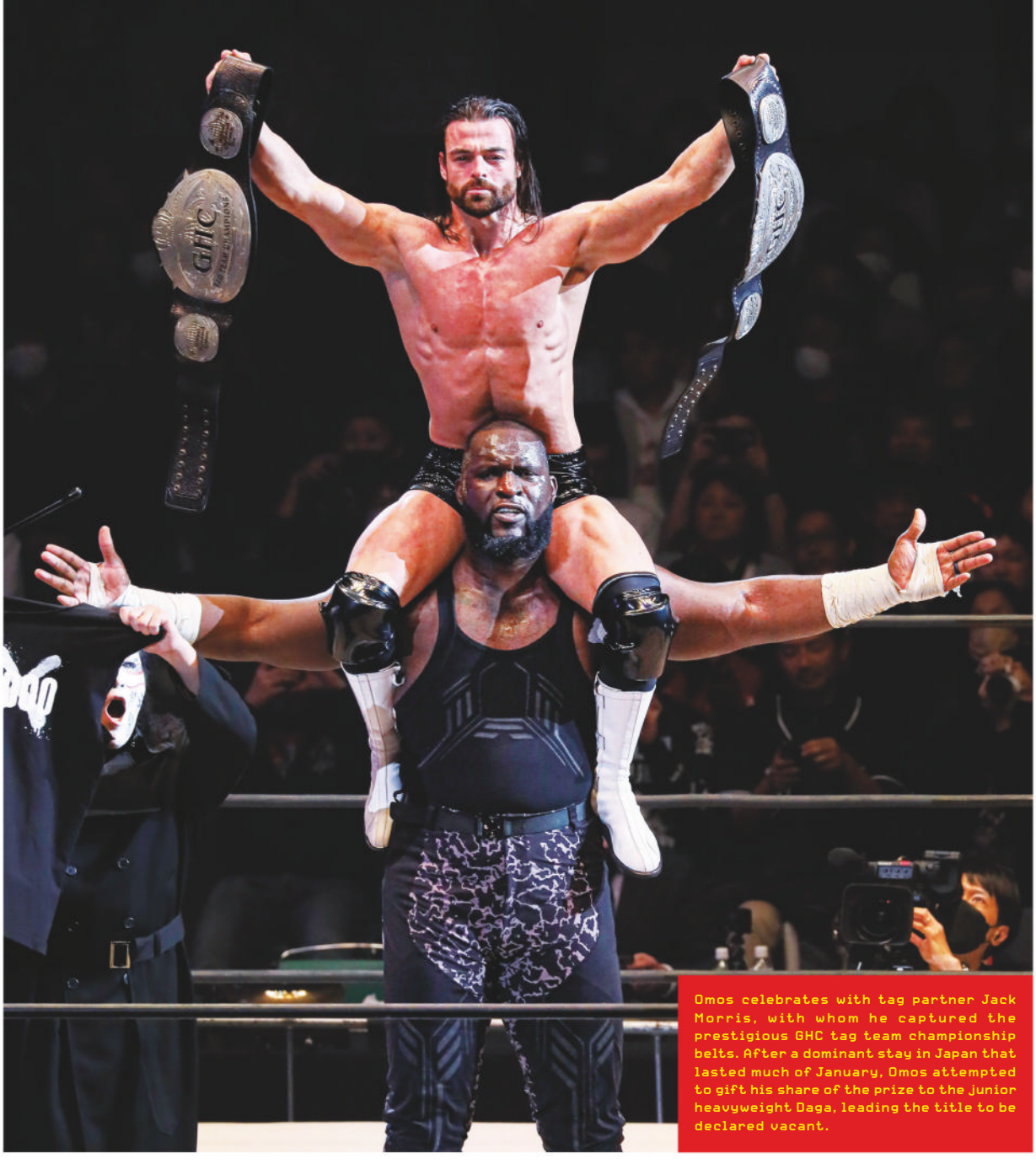
being. The wrestling world was stunned by the revelation that his mystery tag team partner for the New Year's show was to be none other than WWE's Omos. The colossal Nigerian teamed with Morris to challenge Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura for the GHC tag team championship.

Omos' presence in NOAH created a stir in the Japanese wrestling media—one that did not surprise Thomas Pilliard. "There's always been a fascination with the so-called 'giants' coming to Japan to wrestle," said the veteran WWE expert. "Fans in the U.S. might scoff and say that Omos doesn't have much in the way of scientific wrestling ability. But neither did Terry Gordy or Hulk Hogan—and both did just fine in Japan. With his size, Omos is an attraction."

"Levesque has a respect for Japanese wrestling's place in the industry, and we're seeing that in WWE's relationship with NOAH."

And indeed, that's how Omos was treated when he arrived in Tokyo for the match. Although the announcement might have been met by a few eyerolls in the West, the NOAH faithful reacted to him with a sense of awe and, dare we say, appreciation. That didn't diminish when the bell rang. Despite the bravery of the incumbent champions, Marufuji and Sugiura couldn't come close to matching the strength of Omos. And, in the end, that was the deciding factor. The

The great Naomichi Marufuji is unprepared for_and overpowered by_Omos during their tag team bout at NOAH's The New Year 2025.



Omos celebrates with tag partner Jack Morris, with whom he captured the prestigious GHC tag team championship belts. After a dominant stay in Japan that lasted much of January, Omos attempted to gift his share of the prize to the junior heavyweight Daga, leading the title to be declared vacant.

massive athlete scored the winning pinfall for his (surprisingly cohesive) team, bagging them GHC tag team gold.

The semi-main event of The New Year saw Shinsuke Nakamura make a triumphant return to Pro Wrestling NOAH. Two years prior, Nakamura participated in a special match against his hero, The Great Muta, in the same venue. At the time, it felt like that match was more about WWE doing Nakamura (and Muta) a solid by letting them wrestle. This year was different.

"There's always been a fascination with the so-called 'giants' coming to Japan to wrestle."

This time around, Nakamura faced off against rising star Ulka Sasaki, a former MMA fighter who transitioned to professional wrestling after being inspired by Nakamura's match against Muta. Their encounter was a highly anticipated part of the NOAH New Year 2025 card.

"Other than showing off their United States champion, WWE didn't really have anything to gain by sending Nakamura again," explained Pilliard. "But they recognized that NOAH might benefit by having one of its up-and-coming talents rub shoulders with a puroresu legend like Nakamura. I guess that in this new WWE era, that's reason enough."

The match itself was a hard-hitting, back-and-forth encounter, with Sasaki showing his toughness throughout. At one point, he locked Nakamura in a triangle choke and almost forced the WWE star to tap out. Nakamura survived ... barely. But that's where the momentum of the match changed.

Leaning into the rule-breaking ways that he's been known for in the U.S. of

Nakamura grounds his opponent, MMA fighter-turned-wrestler Ulka Sasaki, during their singles contest at The New Year.

late, Nakamura sprayed the dreaded poison mist into the eyes of Sasaki, capitalizing after the referee had been knocked down. The ref recovered just in time to count the decisive pinfall when Nakamura delivered not one, but two Kinshasas to the head of his opponent.

In the aftermath of the match, it's hard to argue with Thomas Pilliard's analysis: Sasaki did benefit from being in the ring with Nakamura. Even in defeat, the NOAH man is a brighter star because of it.

Still, it is worth noting: In the war of WWE vs. NOAH, WWE went two for two that night. While Nakamura returned stateside, Omos stuck around NOAH for much of January, amassing a healthy seven-match winning streak. On January 25, he announced he was relinquishing the GHC tag team championship, as he was returning to WWE. We have to wonder what might have been, had he stayed on excursion for a bit longer, but the experience seems to have injected new life into the 7'3" superstar.

After such a hotly discussed collaboration, fans are understandably wondering

"I wouldn't be surprised to see Nakamura return to NOAH. And, given his success there, Omos as GHC champion no longer seems like a ridiculous proposition."

Having dispersed the poison mist, Nakamura landed two Kinshasas to put away his opponent. Despite the loss, Sasaki emerged from the match a bigger star than he entered it.

what the future holds for the budding NOAH-WWE relationship. For that insight, we turned to Pilliard once again.

"The working relationship between the two companies has been a slow build," he noted. "Which is what actually makes me think they are in it for the long haul. I wouldn't be surprised to see Nakamura return to NOAH again. And, given his success there in such a short time, Omos as GHC champion no longer seems like a ridiculous proposition. WWE also has a wealth of quality junior heavyweight wrestlers under contract, who might fancy testing themselves against the NOAH juniors."

And what about wrestlers going the other way? Up until now, the talent exchange traffic has generally gone in one direction. Could we see some NOAH stars arrive in WWE?

"Anything is possible," said Pilliard. "I've heard that behind the scenes, WWE is keeping a close eye on a few NOAH stars. Could I see someone like Daga or Kaito Kiyomiya pop up in NXT, or even a whole WWE vs. NOAH card in Japan? Absolutely! That's the beauty of these kind of working agreements ... anything is possible."

GREEN MEANS GO

A TIMELINE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDUSTRY LEADER AND THE "EMERALD ARK"

APRIL 30, 2014
KENTA (later renamed Hideo Itami) announces his resignation from NOAH to sign with WWE. This is a significant moment, as KENTA is one of NOAH's top stars, and it suggests that WWE has eyes on Japan.

JANUARY 1, 2023
WWE and NOAH partner for the first time for The Great Muta's retirement tour. WWE sends Shinsuke Nakamura to Japan to face Muta—the WWE Hall-of-Famer—at NOAH's The New Year event.

JUNE 16, 2024
Pro Wrestling NOAH teases a "major announcement" regarding WWE during its Grand Ship event, hinting at a potential future collaboration.

JULY 13, 2024
AJ Styles defeats Naomichi Marufuji at NOAH's Destination 2024 event.

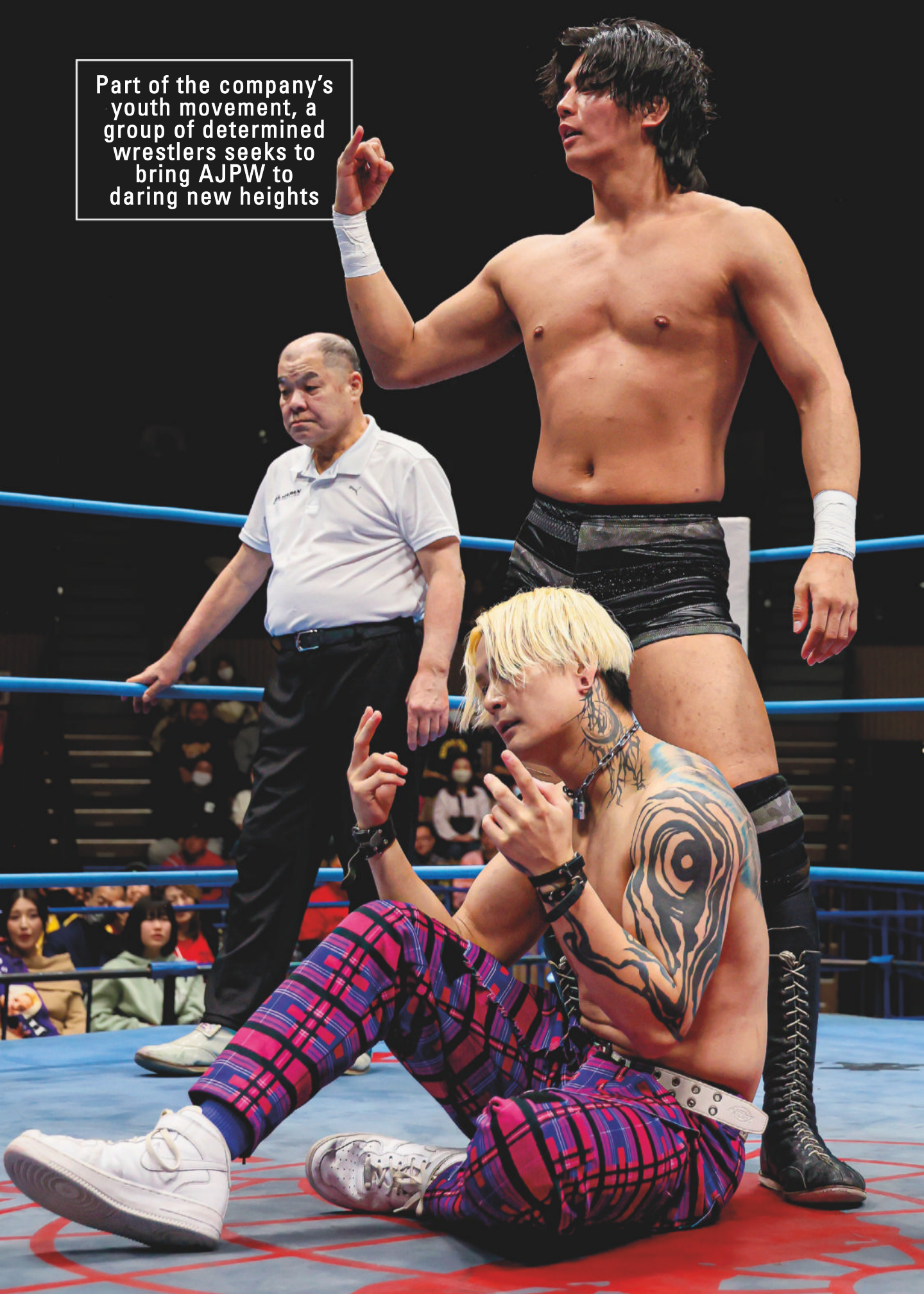
AUGUST 2, 2024
NXT's Josh Briggs and Tavion Heights arrive in Japan to take part in the annual N-1 Victory tournament.

NOVEMBER 7, 2024
Shawn Michaels announces that NOAH wrestler Yoshiki Inamura will be training at the WWE Performance Center.

JANUARY 1, 2025
Shinsuke Nakamura defeats Ulka Sasaki at NOAH The New Year 2025; Omos teams with Jack Morris to defeat Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura for the GHC tag team championship.

ALL JAPAN'S NEW HOPE

TEXT BY LYRIC SWINTON
PHOTOS BY ISSA MARIE
TRANSLATIONS BY ASH MANN



Part of the company's youth movement, a group of determined wrestlers seeks to bring AJPW to daring new heights

Yuma Anzai and Rising HAYATO clutch the All Asia tag title belts. As pillars of All Japan's red-hot ELPIDA faction, these two athletes have thrived in both singles and tandem competition.

ZEN NIHON PURORESU: better known to English-speaking wrestling fans as All Japan Pro Wrestling. For many, the mere mention of the promotion invokes memories of the 1980s and '90s, when giants went to war in some of the most famous bouts in wrestling history. But as memorable as its past has been, AJPW's present and future are looking incredibly bright.

The year 2024 marked a clear shift in direction for the promotion, one highlighted by ascendant younger talent. It began with the shocking story of Yuma Anzai defeating Katsuhiko Nakajima to become the youngest-ever Triple Crown heavyweight champion at 24 years old. Directly after the title win came Champion Carnival, All Japan's annual round-robin tournament. There, the former "Super Rookie" would shed the standard young boy attire of black trunks and boots, debuting a new look befitting of a young star preparing to take the throne as the company's future ace.

Champion Carnival also marked the coming out party for another young star on the roster. Ren Ayabe, the six-foot-seven resident giant, officially joined All Japan in March 2024. He was announced as a Champion Carnival participant shortly after. On the first night of the tournament, Ayabe staked his claim with a new look, almost akin to an early "Rainmaker" Kazuchika Okada, complete with flashy coats and dyed hair. However, the most shocking part of the night would be Ayabe going on to defeat the reigning ace of All Japan, Kento Miyahara, in a thrilling upset victory. Although he'd end up coming out of that particular tournament empty-handed, he made clear his intentions to become a major player in the company.

Another member of Anzai and Ayabe's generation, Ryuki Honda, would make a name for himself as a main-event caliber talent in All Japan. Once Anzai's "New Period" tag team partner, the charismatic and eccentric Honda set his sights on taking AJPW worldwide. He challenged EC3 for the NWA World heavyweight championship—the first time the title was contested in an AJPW ring since 1989. Although he came up short, his future—as well as the future of his peers—became evident on the very same night.

No Japanese stable is complete without a standout junior heavyweight. And when it comes to All Japan Pro Wrestling, no junior stands out quite like Rising HAYATO. With his bleached blond hair, numerous tattoos, and British punk rock style, HAYATO is strikingly unique in comparison to his peers throughout Japan. In February 2024, after years of being in stables with more accomplished and experienced wrestlers, HAYATO finally captured the prestigious AJPW World junior heavyweight championship.

With all the pieces in place, the stage was set for May 29, 2024, where

Anzai would officially align himself with Honda, Ayabe, and HAYATO after successfully defending the Triple Crown against Champion Carnival winner Kento Miyahara. Three weeks later, the four men would reveal the name of their new stable: ELPIDA (Ελπίδα), the Greek word for hope.

If hope was the vision, hope was certainly the outcome. Since ELPIDA's formation, Anzai has been Triple Crown champion; HAYATO has been World junior heavyweight champion; and Ren Ayabe and Ryuki Honda faced each other in the Royal Road tournament final, with Ayabe emerging as the victor.

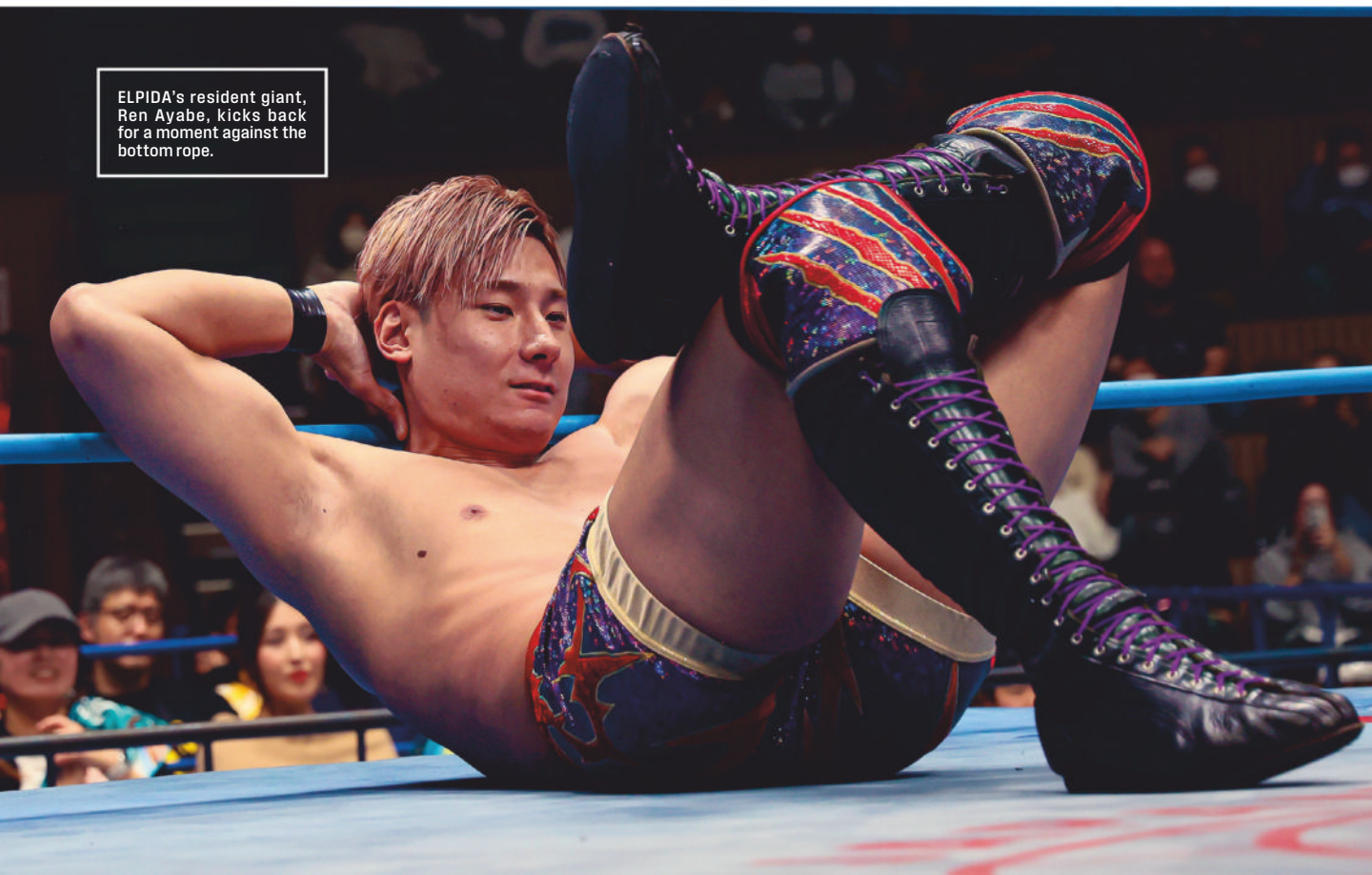
When asked about the meaning and significance of the ELPIDA name, HAYATO said the intention was to "in a sense, destroy what has been the staple of All Japan and create a new legacy for ourselves. That's why we chose that name."

So far, the plan is working. In addition to their singles accolades, Anzai and HAYATO captured the All-Asia tag team championship—an openweight title that happens to be the oldest prize for tag teams in Japan. The duo recorded their second successful defense at AJPW's New Year's Eve show, on the same card where Ayabe and Honda teamed up to defeat Atsuki & Yuma Aoyagi.

"The popularity of wrestling in the casual environment in Japan has dropped compared to what it was," Anzai said, speaking to *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* with the help of a translator. "To bring more casual fans into the product, we want to be a new hope for All Japan and the wrestling world through creating this new unit, ELPIDA."

The young Anzai, already a former Triple Crown champion, executes a textbook dropkick.

In addition to becoming the youngest Triple Crown champion in history, Yuma Anzai won Tokyo Sports' Newcomer Award in 2022 and the Outstanding Performance Award in 2024. Not bad for less than three years as a wrestler! Anzai's rise from "Super Rookie" to a standout young leader on the roster has


ELPIDA's resident giant, Ren Ayabe, kicks back for a moment against the bottom rope.

Rising HAYATO draws attention with his outsize personality and personal style (drawing heavily from Japan's visual kei subculture). But, most importantly, he gets things done inside the ring.

Ryuki Honda takes down Atsuki Aoyagi en route to a key tag team victory.

been just as much of a whirlwind for him as it was for AJPW fans who have followed his journey.

"I didn't really predict what was going to happen. Ever since I debuted, I focused more on what I had in front of me and just kept building onto that," Anzai said. "At one point in time, All Japan wasn't in a very good place. I didn't think just because I was a rookie, I couldn't do anything ... I aimed to change the present and that hopefully I could do something better. I guess that's what led to me having this amazing two and a half years of wrestling after my debut."

Rising HAYATO, on the other hand, has been very intentional in his climb to the top of All Japan's junior division. "Until now, a lot of the juniors in All Japan had a very simple image, nothing very striking," HAYATO said, via translator. "So, my choice was to have a very glittery and unique individual style that only I can show, while also respecting the traditional techniques of the All Japan style."

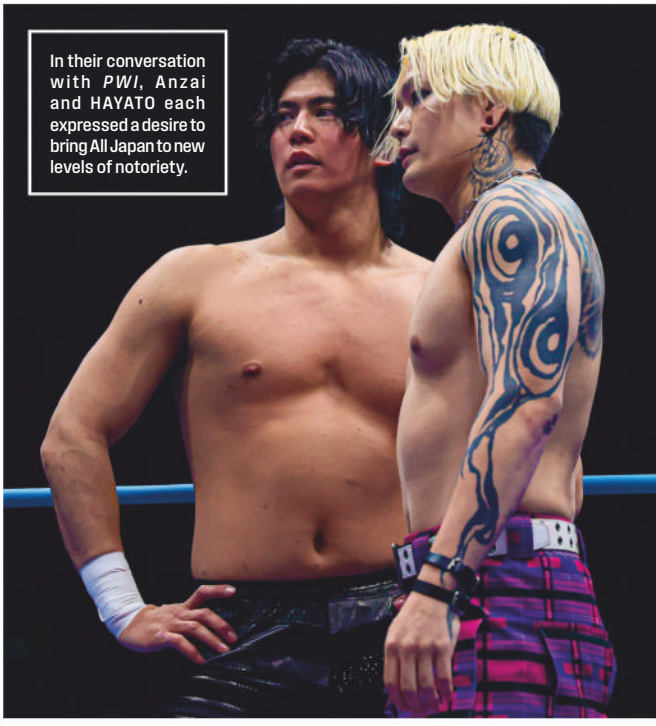
Throughout Japan, ELPIDA's peers in other promotions are also transitioning from the "next up" to the "now." Names like Konosuke Takeshita, Yota Tsuji, OZAWA, Kaito Kiyomiya, Yuki Ueno, and others are taking center

stage as champions and main-eventers. As All Japan's young ace-in-waiting, Yuma Anzai is well aware of the generation shift in Japanese wrestling that ELPIDA is a part of—and he's hungry to be the very best.

"I see all the other guys through newspapers or social media," Anzai began. "I cannot afford to lose to them, in the sense that I want to make All Japan the most exciting pro wrestling amongst all of Japan. I've fought against Kiyomiya before, and it was a very exciting match. If there's a chance to wrestle against guys of the same generation, I would love to do it again. But the first thing of all, I want to make my matches the most exciting in All Japan ... and make All Japan matches the most exciting in all of Japan."

Rising HAYATO is more dismissive of his peers from other companies, noting "I don't really care about the other guys of this generation." Instead, he is focused on his own efforts; already confident that he isn't just the best junior heavyweight in All Japan, but in Japanese wrestling overall. "Of the people of the junior heavyweight division in my generation, I believe that I have the most exciting matches and the most unique worlds I will bring you in when you watch my matches," HAYATO said.

Yet, there is at least one wrestler HAYATO has his eye on. "If I had to pick one [to wrestle], obviously it would be MAO from DDT," he revealed. "Because about seven years ago, we teamed together in DDT's DNA shows. If there's a chance, I would love to fight against MAO one day."



In their conversation with *PWI*, Anzai and HAYATO each expressed a desire to bring All Japan to new levels of notoriety.

Anzai and HAYATO display impressive chemistry as a duo.

Over the past year, AJPW's attendance numbers have continued to rise as the company has brought young stars like ELPIDA, Yuma Aoyagi, and Dan Tamura to the forefront—not to mention fan favorites like the Saito Brothers. HAYATO believes that the promotion's growth is because of the high standards these young stars have set for fans. But he knows the group can still do more.

"All Japan fans, especially those that physically come to the shows, they know they will have top-class satisfaction from watching the show top to bottom," he said. "The goal is to have bigger locations. We would love to fully house the shows and bring even more satisfaction than we did over the past year for this current and upcoming year."

Anzai has his own ideas on how to spread the good news of what ELPIDA is up to ... and, by extension, AJPW. "What I really want to do is get more fans to the product no matter what the reason is," Anzai said. "Even if they see the two of us [Anzai and HAYATO] and think, *Oh, these guys are really cool. I want to go watch them.* Whether it's because we're cool [or because] the wrestling is great, they come to the show and know All Japan shows will definitely give them a very satisfying experience."

It's still too soon to tell how history will remember the young stars of ELPIDA. But, if nothing else, All Japan Pro Wrestling's new "hope" is certainly off to a strong start.

EXCLUSIVE COVERAGE:

CHAMPIONS IN JAPAN

As 2024 became 2025, many new champions were crowned—while others, retaining their titles, stood tall—at some of Tokyo's most prestigious wrestling venues

PHOTOS BY ISSA MARIE

Zack Sabre Jr. did the unthinkable, retaining his IWGP World heavyweight title on two consecutive nights at the Tokyo Dome.

AND NEW: Saya Kamitani celebrates after winning the World of Stardom championship (her first career world title).

Yota Tsuji, who won last year's New Japan Cup tournament, shows off the IWGP Global heavyweight strap he liberated from David Finlay on January 4.

Marigold has crowned its second World champion, with Utami Hayashishita capturing the "Crimson Red" belt from Sareee back on January 3.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU: Starlight Kid celebrates with the "White Belt," which represents the Wonder of Stardom championship, after dethroning Natsupoi at the Ryogoku Kokugikan sumo hall.

Jun Saito basks in the spotlight as the new All Japan Triple Crown champion. Saito got there with a victory over incumbent Davey Boy Smith Jr.

TJPW fans were thrilled for Suzume, who, five years into her career, finally struck singles gold with the International Princess crown.

Wing★gori (Hanan & Saya Iida) are all smiles after overtaking H.A.T.E. for the Goddesses of Stardom tag team title.

ALL ELITE DUOS: The Young Bucks (Matthew & Nicholas Jackson) reclaimed the IWGP heavyweight tag belts at Wrestle Dynasty, while The Sons of Texas (Dustin Rhodes & Sammy Guevara) held on to the ROH World tag team title.

The 28-year-old OZAWA is a made man after upsetting GHC heavyweight champ Kaito Kiyomiya at NOAH's New Year show in the Nippon Budokan.

El Phantasmo stands tall as NJPW Television champion.

Last year, Kouki Amarei became the inaugural GHC Women's champion. On the January 3 Marigold show, which took place at the Ota City Gymnasium, she mounted her first successful title defense.

Can anyone defeat Mayu Iwatani for the IWGP Women's title? "The Icon Of Stardom" retained over AZM in a too-brief, yet thrilling bout at Wrestle Kingdom.

Backstage at the Nippon Budokan, Eita poses with the GHC junior heavyweight belt, which he has just won for a second time.

BOW DOWN, MINIONS: At Wrestle Dynasty, Athena poses with her ROH World championship belts. One week later, at Korakuen Hall, she would reign victorious in a title bout with Thekla.

The Ichiban Sweet Boys (Robbie Eagles & Kosei Fujita) parlayed a Super Junior Tag League win into another victory at Wrestle Kingdom 19, where they became IWGP junior heavyweight tag champs.

Over at the Tokyo Dome City Hall location, Kuroshio TOKYO Japan (NXT's Ikemen Jiro) captured the GLEAT G-INFINITY championship with partner Seigo Tachibana.

Now a two-time TJPW Princess of Princess champion, Mizuki sits among streamers thrown by fans at Korakuen Hall. The January 4 title change marked the end of Miu Watanabe's 279-day reign.

Chris Brookes has impressed fans in his second reign as DDT's KO-D openweight champ, fighting off Daisuke Sasaki in a December 28 defense at Ryogoku Kokugikan.

MAJOR™

BIG RUBBER GUYS™

MACHO MAN RANDY SAVAGE

RIC FLAIR

MAGNUM T.A.

DUSTY RHODES

ANDRE THE GIANT

DYNAMITE KID

DAVEY BOY SMITH WITH MATILDA

SGT SLAUGHTER

ROAD WARRIOR ANIMAL

ROAD WARRIOR HAWK

HACKSAW JIM DUGGAN

WARLORD

BARBARIAN

MAJOR BENDIES

EXTREME MAJOR BENDIES

PICTURED ARE JUST SOME OF THE OFFICIALLY LICENSED FIGURES THAT MAJOR HAVE RELEASED SO FAR!

MAJOR™

OFFICIALLY LICENSED 8 INCH RUBBER FIGURES!
New figures available to order in January, March, May, July, September and November 2025. Also look out for convention exclusives!

OFFICIALLY LICENSED 5 INCH BENDABLE FIGURES!
New figures available to order throughout 2025. Also look out for convention exclusives!

OFFICIALLY LICENSED 4.5 INCH VINYL FIGURES!
New for 2025! Coming soon!

FOLLOW **COLLECTMAJOR** ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ALL THE LATEST NEWS.

WRESTLING SUPERSTARS BRIAN MYERS AND MATT CARDONA WITH THEIR BIG RUBBER GUYS!

ORDER NOW! COLLECTMAJOR.COM

THE SCRUM

TV BREAKDOWN 58 | MAT, STAGE, & SCREEN 60 | THE W COLUMN 62 |
RIGHTEOUS WRAP UP 63 | ABOUT FACE 64 | ON HEELS 65 | BRAINBUSTERS 66
EL TIRABUZON 67 | THE IRISH WHIP 68 | COAST TO COAST 69

The recent *Fractured* exhibition exposed new audiences to the visual art of Stardom wrestler **THEKLA**. To learn more about the inspiration for the two paintings here, check out "Mat, Stage, & Screen."

Artwork by **THEKLA**

RAW'S NEW ERA

"The Final Boss" becomes "The Friendly Boss," the "OTC" emerges as the *only* tribal chief, and the boos run wild for a tarnished icon ... and that was only the first *Raw* on Netflix.

FOCUS ON ...

WWE NXT

NXT VIEWER NUMBERS [CW]
December 31: **1,338,000**
January 7: **798,000**
January 14: **779,000**
January 21: **812,000**
January 28: **827,000**
February 4: **766,000**

ANALYSIS Bayley teamed with NXT Women's champion Giulia against resident bad girls Roxanne Perez & Cora Jade to kick off the January 28 broadcast, live from Atlanta's Center Stage—best known as the home of the classic *WCW Worldwide* program. After a technical back-and-forth between Giulia and Perez, and a few dives outside the ring involving all four women, Bayley came in for a landing with a flying elbowdrop off the top rope—a Randy Savage tribute perfectly suited to the mid-1990s vibe—to pin Jade. Though *NXT* and *Dynamite* haven't competed head-to-head in quite some time, it is noteworthy that WWE's third brand is surpassing AEW's flagship program every week, and, on this particular night, by a 223,000-viewer margin. Giulia's title victory over Perez on the January 7 "New Year's Evil" edition is considered one of *NXT's* best matches of the last few months.

Rhea Ripley stands tall with the Women's World title belt after defeating Liv Morgan on the *Raw* Netflix premiere.
©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

RAW ON NETFLIX

WWE SCORED BIG with its January 6 premiere on Netflix: Every major WWE superstar, important legends, great matches, and even a title change were in the mix. Michael Cole and Pat McAfee had the challenge of connecting with their usual WWE audience while providing broader context to Netflix consumers who might be sampling the product for the first time.

The Rock started the show hot at the Intuit Dome in Inglewood, California, talking up the historic moment and coming across as media-friendly Dwayne Johnson, rather than the boardroom jerk that fans have booed over the past year. He congratulated Undisputed champion Cody Rhodes for "carrying the company on his back" and gave a shout-out to the "Original Tribal Chief," Roman Reigns.

Among the headlines coming out of the show were Reigns becoming the definitive tribal chief by unleashing two spears to pin the pretender to the ulafala, Solo Sikoa; Rhea Ripley defeating Liv Morgan for the Women's World championship; and CM Punk forcing Seth Rollins to go to sleep in the main event.

While Hulk Hogan's role at last year's Republican National Convention might have raised his mainstream profile, it seems that fans don't think he has properly atoned for the racist remarks—caught on tape—that he made several years ago. It came crashing down and had to hurt inside as most of the 17,000 fans in attendance booed the "Real American" mercilessly during his promo.

As an aside, Jimmy Hart accompanying Hogan is always a questionable move because Hart is associated more with WCW's pampered Hollywood star of the 1990s than the WWF's superhero of the '80s.

Without Nielsen ratings, how do we measure *Raw's* success on Netflix? Tudum, Netflix' companion website, ranks its top 10 programs by calculating the number of views, and then divides those views by how long people watched those programs.

Competition on Netflix will be more intense than it was on the USA Network. The January 6 premiere was ranked number four, with 5.9 million views. By January 27, *Raw* had dropped to 2.9 million views, ranked ninth on the list. By point of comparison, Netflix' top program, *The Night Agent*, earned 15.2 million views that week.

This isn't necessarily bad news for *Raw*. While *Raw* may no longer be the biggest dog in the yard, it reaches twice the audience on Netflix as it did on USA.

One more plum for Netflix: While WWE premium live events stream domestically on Peacock, Netflix carries them internationally. Peacock received all the domestic views for the Royal Rumble, but there were enough international views for the Rumble to be ranked number 10 on Tudum's list, with 2.1 million.

GRAVES BURIED?

In a January 14 social-media post, Corey Graves stated he was "not famous enough" to continue as *Raw's* color commentator when the franchise moved to Netflix. Graves was still smarting from the decision to move him to *NXT*, alongside Vic Joseph and Booker T.

Graves, who had also been replaced by Joe Tessitore as lead announcer on *Smackdown*, said he would address the situation after appearing on that night's program on The CW. But Graves didn't appear on *NXT* that night, and he deleted the post. He reappeared without explanation the following week.

It isn't clear whether Graves was really in trouble with management for his public disgruntlement or was genuinely sitting it out. Or was it part of a broader angle to develop on *NXT*? We learned from Pat McAfee's stint on *Smackdown* that he tends to leave WWE during football season, so Graves could still be sent to *Raw* at some point.

For the moment, Graves claims to be happy with *NXT*. But, Corey, what was it *really* all about?

CONTROVERSY DOWN UNDER

The news that AEW had booked the 50,000-seat Suncorp Stadium for February 15 in Brisbane, Australia, caused a worldwide fervor, much like the company's booking of London's Wembley Stadium for All In back in 2023. Yet, there were grumblings when fans who had purchased tickets realized Brisbane would not host a pay-per-view, but *Grand Slam Australia*, a two-hour special to replace *Collision* that night on TNT.

Hundreds of dollars for tickets, travel, and accommodations ... for *Collision*-plus? Furthermore, the event was moved to the smaller Brisbane Entertainment Centre.

"Having this be a TV event has always been the plan," AEW President Tony Khan told *PWI* and TV Insider's Scott Fishman. "That's something the network wanted. It's something the network brought to us recently as an opportunity to follow *NBA All-Star Saturday*. We saw it as a huge opportunity. It was a great vote of confidence for our partners at Warner Bros. Discovery ... It's a great opportunity, given the lead-in."

PHOTO COURTESY TNA WRESTLING

SPOTLIGHT MATCH

JOE HENDRY VS. MATT CARDONA

***TNA IMPACT*, JANUARY 23**

Hendry was on his way to his first successful World title defense as he planted Matt Cardona with a pop-up powerbomb. But there was a problem: Cardona had knocked down the referee, who was out of position. Cardona then hit the champ with a low blow. John Layfield reprised his role as equalizer, hitting Cardona with a clothesline on the outside. That gave Hendry a chance to rally with the Standing Ovation to pin Cardona. Justice was done, vigilante-style.

SUMMER, SUMMER, SUMMERTIME

A former Stardom tag champ goes solo with her latest art show; **NIKKI GARCIA** returns to reality TV; and **BRANDI & CODY RHODES** continue to shine.

"The Toxic Spider" Thekla poses with one of her paintings at the recent *Fractured* exhibition in Japan.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THEKLA

AT THE TIME OF WRITING this latest column, I was bundled up in a cozy wrap sweater, waiting to see if my local weather forecaster's prediction of snow was indeed going to materialize. And with visions of the beaches of Brigantine and Playa del Carmen dancing in my head, I'm at least going to bring sunshine to you in the form of the latest wrestling-meets-entertainment news.

Now, on with the show!

THEKLA'S VULNERABLE ART WORLD

This is the first time I've written here about a wrestler's visual artistic ventures. I'm thrilled today to spotlight the magnetic **Thekla**: her *Fractured* art exhibition in Tokyo, her inspiration behind it, and her overall artistic process. I spoke with the Stardom talent after the show had already commenced—and she was pleased to note how much of a success it was.

"It was packed, which was my main goal," Thekla said of the venue. "Everybody was really surprised. There [were] some people who have been to my exhibitions before, and they could see there was something changing. It was my first time putting something on canvas. I changed the size [of the artwork]—I went two times as big. Other people mostly [were] there for the first time and amazed that a wrestler can do something so different from wrestling. It was very well-received overall."

The former Goddesses of Stardom champion laid the groundwork for her latest solo art show during a hiatus from the ring last year. A chance meeting with a "very well known curator and gallerist in Tokyo"—who also likes wrestling—was the key to Thekla's *Fractured* exhibition becoming reality.

Fractured featured, among other things, visual interpretations of something very familiar to pro wrestlers. Bluntly: "what it's like to be dropped on your head."

"It's pictures of girls suplexing each other," Thekla explained. "I'm trying to show the impact and everything that happens in that moment. The thoughts that go through your head while you're fighting, as well as the pain you are feeling. Very complex. If you see it, you'll know what I mean."

Other pieces were less broad and more personal. "Self-portraits based on my experiences," said Thekla. "A girl sitting in her chair after a long day ... after a title match. There's hundreds of little messages. I try not to work too personal anymore because it's so intense for me to work like that. But fans love it. [It's] like an ancient language and trying to find out what's going on in my crazy head."

For the outspoken and multi-talented athlete, creating art outside the ring is "a very vulnerable process." And it's a different challenge than performing in front of hundreds of wrestling fans. She doesn't take it lightly.

Inspired by artists such as the late American icon **Jean-Michel Basquiat**, Thekla is "really dying" to share her art with the United States. "I've only done my solo exhibitions in Japan," she said. "I would love to take my stuff to America. I'm currently working on something in the States. If everything works out, in a couple of months, there might be something happening when it comes to the art stuff."

Thekla adds that aside from her visual artwork, she's also planning to take her wrestling gear and fashion to the next level—perhaps with her own fashion label—and more designs to share with her gearmakers and tailors.

"I have some pretty crazy stuff coming up," teased Thekla, whose attire is as flashy as her in-ring attacks. "Like, big gears. A step up from what, at least, I've been showing so far."

She continued: "When I was a kid I wanted to be a fashion designer. I have a strong love for fashion in general. Of course I'm going to try to design my own stuff. I'm obsessed with doing everything myself. If I can, if I have the time, I will try to do it all. I enjoy creating so much. When you create something and it comes out the way you imagined it, it's just such a satisfying feeling."

We wait with open arms for you to sign, seal, and deliver all of that for us, Thekla!

NOW STREAMING

Last year, I shared some exclusive news from "The Renaissance Woman" **Hyan** about her role in the critically-acclaimed Netflix series, *Mo*. Finally, the wait for the second season is over! You can now watch Hyan, lead actor **Mohammed Amer**, and a slew of recognizable guest stars—including **Liza Koshy** (*A Family Affair*), **Hannibal Buress** (*The Eric Andre Show*), and rapper **Slim Thug**—on the streaming platform. In my interview with Hyan ahead of the season premiere, the four-time Reality of Wrestling Diamonds champion expressed how elated she was during the filming process, noting she may have caught the "acting bug." So, watch out, Hollywood!

In turn, Hollywood is more than well-acquainted with the **Garcia Twins**. Without mentioning any spoilers, **Nikki Garcia** is making a memorable mark in the Traitors Castle in Season 3 of *The Traitors U.S.* If you don't care to watch the reality series and want to rush straight to the headlines, feel free to do so. But I think you'll be doing yourself a major disservice. My suggestion? Watch this season on Peacock for Nikki and my other personal favorites (**Chrishell Stause**, **Wells Adams**, **Chanel Ayan**, **Dylan Efron** and **Wes Bergmann**). And, if you're a *Vanderpump Rules* fan, **Tom Sandoval** is on the show, as well!

RHODES TO VICTORY

Brandi Rhodes' impressive entrepreneurial work as founder and owner of yoga and Pilates studio Naked Mind has landed her on the January/February 2025 cover of *Best Self* magazine. Brandi shared the cover image on her social media accounts, writing on Instagram, "Naked Mind is for everyone. It's a warm and welcoming, clean environment where you can choose your own adventure everyday!"

She went on to add, "Maybe you're up for getting the best workout of your life, or you're looking for some R&R, maybe you're interested in elevated warm vinyasa, or room temperature is just perfect. Maybe you've got little ones and no one to watch them and REALLY want to take a class. Guess what? WE'VE GOT YOU!!" Brandi promises the first class for Naked Mind Studio visitors is free. And, honestly, knowing all of this information, who can resist?

Brandi's husband, Undisputed WWE champ **Cody Rhodes**, recently collaborated with popular YouTubers **Dude Perfect**. Mr. Rhodes visited the beautiful new Dude Perfect Headquarters earlier this year. Making a pit stop at the Dude Lounge, Cody is seen in a YouTube video of the grand tour of the Dude Perfect HQ3 compound, walking out of an office wearing the championship belt in one brief segment. In another segment, Cody takes on a fun game of Nerf with the Dude Perfect squad. Just another day's work for the "*PWI* 500" top star.

Nikki Garcia (Bella) poses on the red carpet at the *Raw* Netflix premiere on January 6. Garcia also appears in the third season of *The Traitors U.S.*
PHOTO BY MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES

INTERNATIONAL PRINCESS

Australia's **KIRA SUMMER** has made history as the first international student at the TJPW dojo. Now, she's got her sights set on one of the promotion's top prizes.

Kira Summer, kneeling atop her opponent, poses with fellow international wrestlers Ivy Steele and Matcha at TJPW's big January 4 show. PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

THREE YEARS AFTER THE seeds were planted for Tokyo Joshi Pro-Wrestling, Candice LeRae appeared as the first international wrestler to battle for the promotion. LeRae won her debut match against Yuka Sakazaki on TJPW's first show at Korakuen Hall. Eight years later, Kira Summer debuted as the first international wrestler to begin her career at TJPW.

Summer had already dipped her toe in wrestling years before, attending a wrestling school and learning the ropes from her sister, former Riot City Wrestling Women's champion Miki Fortune. Summer was reluctant to pursue a career in the ring, until a friend took her to a live women's wrestling event after the pandemic shutdown.

By then, the 28-year-old Australian had already lived in Japan for six years, pursuing her career as an illustrator and animator, but the live event sparked her desire to start wrestling again. And, by entering the squared circle at TJPW, Summer was following in the footsteps of some powerful and influential international competitors.

After her 2016 debut, LeRae told TJPW fans the promotion would "get even bigger," and she was right. England's Laura James would drop by in 2017. In 2018, Veda Scott, Priscilla Kelly (Gigi Dolin), and Su Yung appeared. Nightshade, Dalys, Gisele Shaw, Allysin Kay, and Millie McKenzie followed in 2019.

In 2020, another incredible first: Thunder Rosa became the first international wrestler to hold the International Princess championship. Alex Windsor and Max The Impaler followed her lead several years later. Wasteland War Party, composed of Max The Impaler and Heidi Howitzer, made history by becoming the first international tag team to hold the Princess Tag Team title in 2023.

In total, more than 70 women wrestlers from 11 different countries have visited Japan to compete in TJPW. While certainly not the first Japanese company to open its doors to traveling competitors, TJPW made doing so a priority—and the wrestling world has reaped the benefits.

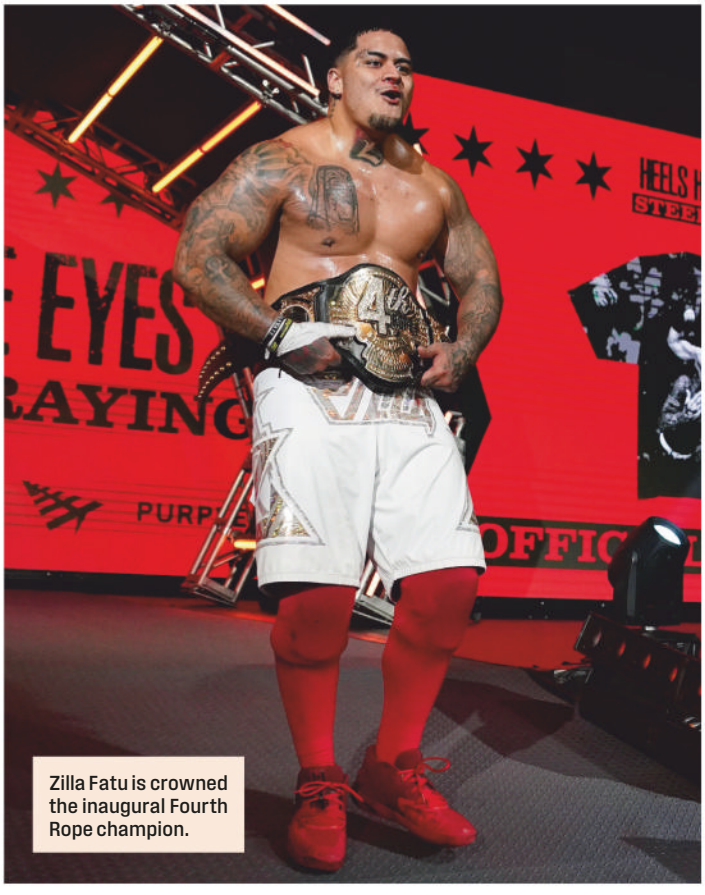
Kira Summer's official wrestling debut is a bold and exciting first stride for TJPW. The promotion has proved its devotion to progress in the past and continues to do so in the present. Summer, the first international talent to be trained in-house—and with 40-plus matches under her belt—has already stated her desire for the International Princess championship.

As she told *Tokyo Weekender*, "Challenging for the belt isn't just about the title itself but also who is holding it. If Rika Tatsumi or Yuki Kamifuku are holders of the belt, for example, those are two people I really want to challenge."

The promotion clearly holds Summer in high regard. The Australian-born competitor participated in the Next Generation Tournament in the fall of 2024, and in a well-received battle royal with members of TJPW's original crew.

Using her powerhouse qualities, keeping her signature high energy, and matching the spirit of her opponents, Summer has prepared herself for a strong future. The first international wrestler to debut for TJPW is one leg drop closer to a historic career.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD



Zilla Fatu is crowned the inaugural Fourth Rope champion.

THE FOURTH ROPE

Rapper and grappling fan **WESTSIDE GUNN** has launched a new promotion that fuses pro wrestling and hip-hop.

THE CROSSOVER BETWEEN PRO wrestling and hip-hop is the strongest it's ever been. Rappers have spent years referencing pro wrestling in their rhymes and showing up at big events to cheer right alongside the other fans in the building. At the forefront of that stands rapper and the head of Griselda Records, Westside Gunn. You've probably seen him in the front row of your favorite wrestling company, from TNA's biggest events to AEW Grand Slam to WrestleMania. Native to Buffalo, New York, the artist is a longtime pro wrestling fan, referencing the business in songs for 15+ years and heading up the current wave of influence that pro wrestling enjoys in hip-hop.

I first discovered Gunn on a song titled "Elizabeth," in reference to the legendary manager of "Macho Man" Randy Savage. So, my introduction to Gunn was a wrestling reference—and I knew the quiet crossover between my two loves had shifted.

Gunn made pro wrestling a part of his brand, often using wrestlers as inspiration for his top-selling merchandise and really pushing how much he wanted to be involved in the business in his rhymes. With that, he started pushing the idea of "Fourth Rope," a sub-brand of Griselda Records, which focuses more on pro wrestling.

Gunn was previously seen on AEW television when he joined Daniel Garcia and performed his entrance music on the way to the ring. And now, he can be heard as the soundtrack to The Hurt Syndicate—Bobby Lashley, Shelton Benjamin, and MVP—as Gunn and Smoke DZA perform their entrance theme.

Gunn has made it clear many times that the goal was to start his own wrestling company. To that end, he began signing wrestlers to his Fourth Rope brand, starting with Josh Bishop, and created the Fourth Rope championship (which has Zilla Fatu as the inaugural champion). Gunn needed a place to showcase Fourth Rope in full. And, alongside fellow longtime pro wrestling fan and rapper Smoke DZA, "Heels Have Eyes" was created.

Fourth Rope is the company, Heels Have Eyes is the show. By showcasing four HHE events in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, Gunn and DZA have demonstrated exactly what the vibe of the company is—a live hip-hop show with some of the best pro wrestlers in the world going toe-to-toe in the ring.

We've seen hip-hop legends like DJ Premier, Pete Rock, Onyx, and The Alchemist mixed in with current favorites like Dave East, Stove God, and Rome Streetz performing some of their best tracks during these events.

We've seen Mike Santana, AJ Francis, Kevin Blackwood, Mustafa Ali, Masha Slamovich, TNA champion Joe Hendry, and many other super-talented wrestlers putting on some of their best matches on these four shows. Alongside singles champ Zilla Fatu, the promotion has also established Fourth Rope tag team champions, with the inaugural titleholders being the legendary Hardy Boyz. (Matt and Jeff Hardy won the championship against The Infantry and Violence Is Forever in a three-way ladder match.) Smoke DZA has even gotten involved with the action, getting into a scuffle with Joe Alonzo in a cage.

Westside Gunn mentioned in his latest release, *Still Praying*, that Fourth Rope, Heels Have Eyes, and pro wrestling would be the focus moving forward; and, with a show being presented about every six weeks now, Fourth Rope is becoming one of the premier independent wrestling companies.

We're seeing more Fourth Rope merch and signs popping up on WWE, AEW, and TNA television, and the underground spirit is becoming more apparent. The vision that Westside Gunn painted for many years is very clear when you watch Heels Have Eyes shows.

All events mentioned are available free on YouTube, and you get exactly what is advertised. It's the best of Griselda hip-hop and the best wrestling in Fourth Rope presented for us by us ... and extremely for the culture.

SILVER SCREEN FACE TURN

"Acting will, at the end of the day, help your wrestling career and make you a better all-around performer."

PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ

Vinny Pacifico's positive attitude and willingness to work hard have paid dividends for him in the ring. Now, those same traits have opened up more opportunities for him in the entertainment industry.

THERE IS MORE THAN one way to find success in the wrestling and entertainment industries, and perseverance does eventually pay off.

Vinny Pacifico's 11-year journey as a professional wrestler includes a two-time run as the Pro Wrestling Magic junior heavyweight champion, jaunts around the world performing for All Elite Wrestling, Slam Wrestling Finland, Romanian Pro Wrestling, and Barrie Wrestling—and, yes, testing The Rock's Papatui grooming products for *PWI*.

Yet with all his in-ring success over the years, the New York native is swan-diving into a new chapter in his acting career with roles in a *The Secret*-inspired movie, *The Frequency of Miracles*, and an untitled horror-thriller wrestling TV series. Pacifico always knew he'd end up expressing himself for a living; not just as an athlete but also as a working thespian. "I have such a strong passion not only for wrestling but [also] entertainment. Character work, promos, and telling stories," he told me. "I love professional wrestling with all my heart, but acting is something I've wanted to try, and had a feeling it would one day come."

These projects represent an important moment in Pacifico's on-screen career. For the accomplished wrestler, any anxieties about acting were quelled by self-affirmations and deep introspection. "I had to take a step back, take a deep breath, and just *trust* and believe in myself," expressed Pacifico. "To bet on myself and know deep down I'm getting this opportunity for a reason, and to just be me. I had to be cool, calm, and collected and just do my best."

With his humble, yet laser-focused approach to acting and wrestling, it's no wonder Pacifico was hand-picked by executive producer Tony "Dream Maker" Dody to star in *Frequency of Miracles* alongside world-renowned authors, speakers, and thought leaders such as Dr. Bruce Lipton, Dr. Joe Vitale, Les Brown, and Marissa Peer. Dody saw "a lot" in Pacifico and gave him a once-in-a-lifetime chance to be a part of the film.

The former Warriors of Wrestling No Limits Champion wrestler is also "truly grateful" to executive producer Jackie Woodside and "the amazing" Daniel Rechnitzer for "seeing something in me [and] opening this door for me."

Pacifico believes *PWI* readers should "definitely" stay tuned for all of his on-screen projects, present and future. "It's going to be nothing like they've ever seen and it will take them on an emotional rollercoaster," he declared. And he assures us *Frequency of Miracles* will "truly be special." The film "will give (*PWI*) readers an inside look about different ways celebrities and people of success became who they are and the obstacles they've had to overcome, along with the mindsets they've had to create to adapt and grow to become their best self."

Pacifico added, "I give people an inside look regarding getting bullied in high school for being a wrestling fan and wrestler. Now, those same people reach out to me to tell me how proud they are of me and such. I forgive and thank them. I believe life is better when we forgive others and spread love."

Vinny Pacfico's film work is off on an exciting ride, but that doesn't mean his wrestling work has come to a complete stop. In 2025, he promises we'll be able to see him wrestle throughout the USA and globally. "I will continue to give fans my best every time I step foot in the ring and try and change lives and inspire others," he said. "There are talks about me returning to Europe for Italy, Spain, and France, as well as Germany."

And if you're a wrestler reading this column with hopes of stepping on a movie or television set for acting work, Pacifico has some valuable counsel for you.

"My advice to any wrestlers who decide to step into acting is go for it and work hard! Know that you can do absolutely anything you put your mind to, and know that acting will, at the end of the day, help your wrestling career and make you a better all-around performer. Go into it as calm and cool as possible and keep your eyes and ears open at all times. Be a sponge and learn from as many people as possible and be someone people want to have on set. Similar advice to professional wrestling: Make the most of every opportunity given and give your all with everything you do."

News on film releases starring Vinny Pacifico can be found on his social media accounts and streaming platforms.

DELIGHTFUL DOMINANCE

CHARLOTTE FLAIR and **ROXANNE PEREZ** deliver in the Rumble match; **THE HURT SYNDICATE** and **JACOB FATU** are forces to reckon with.

©2025 WWE, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Although "The Prodigy" would ultimately finish the match in the runner-up spot, Pollo Del Mar hails Roxanne Perez as a standout performer of the Women's Royal Rumble.

THE 2025 ROYAL RUMBLE is officially in the books, and it was one helluva night for so many!

Charlotte Flair's return to win her second Rumble—securing a WrestleMania berth—seemed a foregone conclusion. Still, the night was filled with plenty of surprises to delight and dismay both myself and the unwashed masses.

I absolutely reveled in the incredible performance of NXT call-up Roxanne Perez, who made it to the final two. Though Booker T's Tuesday night praise of his protege is beyond heavy-handed, he's certainly not wrong. Perez is undoubtedly a "Prodigy."

Though she didn't win, Perez left little question she is indeed the "future of the WWE Women's division." And, to be frank, there are far worse things than being outsmarted in the final stretch by "The Queen."

Speaking of shocking final stretch outcomes, few could have predicted Jey Uso claiming the Men's Royal Rumble. From a field of former champions clamoring to regain footing atop WWE and stories untold, the dark horse slipped from behind to log perhaps the most shocking victory in PLE history. Uso's journey to the top softened even *my* hardened heart for a moment.

Then, I regained my composure to rejoice. Entering the event, I wanted only one thing: anyone—and I mean anyone—but CM Punk!

NORCAL REPRESENT!

Jacob Fatu and I have crossed paths many times! Long before becoming *the* hottest commodity on *Smackdown,* Fatu prowled the Northern California indies, collecting championship victories like most filthy fans gather autographs and selfies with the stars.

I've managed many against "The Samoan Werewolf," and it nearly always spelled disaster. Now, Fatu's operating at all-new, deliciously vicious levels ... which spells trouble for WWE stars and my old National Wrestling Alliance colleague (and current *Smackdown* General Manager) Nick Aldis.

Jacob terrorizing the Universe, leaving even behemoths like Braun Strowman broken and bloodied in his wake, does my heart good. Fatu savaging the biggest names in pro wrestling today feels like something of an amends for past indiscretions.

Each outing almost erases the foul taste left in my mouth after he and brother Journey delivered a despicable "Stinkface" to me some years back. *Almost*. Perhaps I'll forgive Jacob completely when he captures WWE gold—as I predict he will very soon!

THEY HURT PEOPLE

It's unclear whether AEW intends for fans to love The Hurt Syndicate or simply can't prevent it. Either is fine by me. Even in a company where lines between villain and hero are so very blurry, I know exactly where I stand!

Led by the wily MVP, Bobby Lashley and Shelton Benjamin brutalized Private Party to become AEW World tag team champions, much to my elation. The pair represent a breath of fresh air in an environment where style frequently prevails over substance.

Quite clearly, I love a flair for the dramatic. In the case of "The Almighty" and "The Gold Standard," it's utterly unnecessary.

While other acts necessitate a gimmick to gain attention, the AEW tag champs' give-no-quarter, take-no-prisoners offense is all that's needed. Every time The Hurt Syndicate steps in the ring, I simply can't look away!

GRATUITOUS SPOT FEST

How many differences can you spot between these two photos of **RYOHEI OIWA** striking **GABE KIDD**? (ORIGINAL PHOTO BY KEVIN McELVANEY)

ANSWER KEY: Color of Ryohei Oiwa's hair; Color of Ryohei Oiwa's pants stripe; Gabe Kidd's arm tattoo removed; Gabe Kidd has an earring; Gabe Kidd's wristband color changed to yellow; Gabe Kidd has second arm; Extra arm in top left corner; Two additional ring ropes

SIX-PERSON SCRAMBLE

Unscramble the names of these five participants in a multi-promotional dream match. Then, unscramble the bracketed letters to reveal a sixth.

1. JHOI EDL IIKOVGN

[_] _ _ _ _ _ _

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

2. LAEKB TRICISAHN

_ _ _ _ _

[_] _ _ _ _ _ _ [_] _

3. D O E G

[_] _ [_] _

4. LIEILB TSAKRZ

[_] _ _ [_] _ _

_ _ [_] _ _ _

5. RHGTENU

_ _ _ _ _ [_] _

6. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

ANSWER KEY: 1. Hijo Del Viking; 2. Blake Christian; 3. Gedo; 4. Billie Starkz; 5. Gunther; 6. Chad Gable

CMLL's Titan delivers a missile dropkick to NJPW's Taiji Ishimori while fellow luchador Mascara Dorada looks on. The world-famous Tokyo Dome played host to this exciting lucha showcase at the multi-promotional Wrestle Dynasty show.

© 2025 NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING, LTD.

DYNASTIES & ALLIANCES

Interpromotional efforts continue to drive both CMLL and Lucha Libre AAA in 2025.

AFTER HAVING ONE of the most financially successful and critically acclaimed years in its 91-year history, Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) kept the ball rolling during early-2025, as its alliance with All Elite Wrestling (AEW) continued to be remarkably beneficial for both companies.

This time around, CMLL kicked the year off with its contribution to the Tokyo Dome Wrestle Dynasty show, produced by New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW), Stardom, All Elite Wrestling, and Ring of Honor (ROH), as well as CMLL. On this show, **Hechicero**, **Mascara Dorada**, **Soberano Jr.**, and **Titan** represented the Mexican promotion during the Lucha Gauntlet match, while **Persephone** did the same during the International Women's Cup.

Unfortunately, none of the Mexican stars left with the victory. But the alliance with New Japan Pro-Wrestling and All Elite Wrestling is not the only successful international partnership for CMLL, as the company's working relationship with Major League Wrestling has continued to pay dividends for the Mexican promotion. **Mistico** retains his title of World middleweight champion, and other stars, such as **Neon**, **Barbaro Cavernario**, and the aforementioned Persephone continue to be main attractions for the U.S. promotion.

Meanwhile, the other main player in Mexico, Lucha Libre AAA, began a brand-new, year-long tour called "Alianzas." This tour will have the Herculean task of delivering better results for the company than last year's "Origenes" retro tour. This time around, the shows will seemingly revolve around AAA's alliances with some other major promotions around the world.

While this "Alliances" tour has so far only featured talent from TNA and Mexican independent The Crash, that could change. The fact that TNA has strengthened its existing relationship with WWE makes Mexican fans hopeful to see their home-grown talent make the leap to WWE—and for WWE wrestlers to make their way into AAA rings. This may still seem like a far-fetched idea, but the concept of "alliance warfare" between CMLL & AEW and AAA & WWE is enough to make any lucha libre fan excited.

Speaking of Mexican wrestlers and WWE, **El Hijo de Dr. Wagner Jr.**, son of the legendary **Dr. Wagner Jr.**, has reportedly drawn the attention of **Triple H** and company. The third-generation luchador was most recently the GHC heavyweight champion for Pro Wrestling NOAH in Japan, where he became one of the promotion's top attractions along with his brother, **Galeno Del Mal**.

Lastly, right before departing for WWE, **Penta** made sure to pay it forward for the future generations of luchadores in his hometown of Ecatepec, Mexico. Penta opened up a brand-new venue, "Arena Del Valle," in order to help train the new wave of lucha libre stars and give them a place to showcase their skills. Some notable names who have wrestled in this new arena since it opened its doors include **Pagano**, **Komander**, **Dralistico**, and **LA Park**.

Nina Samuels poses with her most prestigious prize to date: the PROGRESS Wrestling Women's championship belt. PHOTO BY ROB BRAZIER/PROGRESS WRESTLING

BIG IN EUROPE

The winter months have seen European wrestling hot as ever, with shows from RevPro, PROGRESS, and wXw that offered big names and big title changes.

GREETINGS, GRAPPLE FANS. And welcome to the first "Irish Whip" of 2025. With lots happening in the U.K. and European scenes, let's dive right in.

Luke Jacobs can no longer lay claim to being the undisputed top man in English wrestling. When we ran a feature on the Manchester native in our "Tag Team 100" issue, Jacobs was riding high as the heavyweight champion of both PROGRESS and RevPro. At the time, it seemed like Jacobs might hold onto both championships for a while ... but **Michael Oku** had other plans. At RevPro's Uprising show on December 21, Oku defeated Jacobs via submission to become a two-time champ in an excellent back-and-forth encounter. The new champion didn't get much time to celebrate, however, as **Ricky Knight Jr.** attacked him after the match. Expect a hotly anticipated clash between these two at a later date.

Elsewhere on a stacked Uprising card: **Connor Mills** & **Jay Joshua** dethroned **Chuck Mambo** & **T.K. Cooper** for the RevPro Undisputed British tag team title, and this month's cover girl, **Mina Shirakawa**, successfully retained her British Women's championship against **Dani Luna**. Shirakawa wasn't quite so lucky in her defense against **Mercedes Mone** a fortnight later at the Tokyo Dome.

Also on December 21, wXw held its 24th Anniversary show in Oberhausen, Germany. In the main event, **Peter Tihanyi** retained his Unified championship over **Laurance Roman** in a hard-hitting row. If there were an MVP award for that night, it would go to **Anita Vaughan**. The Dublin lass not only retained her Shotgun championship over **Rhio** at the anniversary show, but also subbed for **Yuto Nakashima**, teaming with **Oskar Leube** to defend the tag team championship.

Though the RevPro Undisputed British heavyweight belt might have slipped from his grasp, Luke Jacobs held tight to the PROGRESS championship. At the lengthily titled "PROGRESS Chapter 175: Unboxing VII: The Curtain Call," Jacobs bested Ricky Knight Jr., **Man Like DeReiss**, and **Leon Slater** in a four-way match to walk out with his championship gold still in tow. As big of a main event as that was, December 29 belonged to the women of PROGRESS, as **Nina Samuels** made headlines by ending the 434-day reign of Women's champion Rhio. Such was the dominance of Rhio as champion, that the victory has to stand as perhaps the biggest in Samuels' career.

The PROGRESS faithful in London that night were also treated to the belated Christmas present of seeing **Hijo Del Vikingo** in person. But unfortunately, the talented luchador suffered an injury in his match against **Kid Lykos II** and couldn't continue.

Bits & bobs: After a well-received show in London on January 26, Game Changer Wrestling announced that **Josh Barnett** would be bringing his Bloodsport brand to British shores for an event on September 28 ... There is still no update on a proposed air date for the revived *World Of Sport Wrestling* shows taped last September ... Former PROGRESS and NXT U.K. booker **Jim Smallman** has landed a new gig as WWE's International Talent Scout ... RevPro has said it is "actively trying" to get Undisputed British Women's champion, Mercedes Mone, to appear on a future show.

That's it from me for this edition. Have a good time ... till next time.

With a career spanning more than 20 years, new NSPW champion Pee Wee is also recognizable for his exploits away from the ring. PHOTO BY ANDRE BEAUPRE

RINGING IN 2025

Quebec honors its best of 2024; a new champion is crowned; and many other titleholders retain.

THE QUEBEC INDEPENDENT scene recently celebrated its most compelling wrestlers of 2024. **Benjamin Tull** received the Wrestler of the Year award, the first of his 25-year career. Tull won the three major singles titles in Quebec last year: the NSPW, IWS, and Battlewar championships. On the women's side, **Kristara** was named Female Wrestler of the Year for the first time. "The Sweetest Pea" won the IWS heavyweight title, the IWS Women's title (against **Masha Slamovich**), and the NSPW junior heavyweight title, as well.

In the tag team division, **The Wonderboys** (**Dylan Donovan** & **Yann Pike**) won the Tag Team of the Year award for a second year in a row. North Shore Pro Wrestling won Promotion of the Year for the 14th consecutive time. And brothers **Jason** and **Keven Gray** brought home Match of the Year and Feud of the Year honors.

Speaking of Jason Gray, he made a massive impact in NSPW to start the year, attacking champion **Travis Toxic** in a four-way elimination bout and costing him the title. Veteran grappler **Pee Wee** won the match and the belt, his first reign with the prize. Wrestling for more than 20 years now, Pee Wee is one of the best-known wrestling personalities in Quebec City, as he hosts a popular radio show and warms up crowds at hockey and baseball games.

In Cowansville, Quebec, TV celebrity **Kevin Raphael** held his third Sans Restriction Chrono show. **Samuray Del Sol** and **Raj Dhesi** (the former **Jinder Mahal**) were on the show, as **Zak Patterson** kept the promotion's title in a three-way dance with **Loue O'Farrell** and **Marko Estrada**.

Smash Wrestling had a special main event on February 1 in Toronto, when Smash champion **Psycho Mike** wrestled Smash Women's champion **Jody Threat**. The match didn't have a conclusive winner, as it ended with a double-pin.

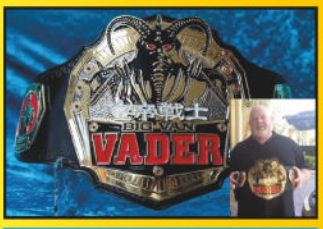
Did you say rematch? Fans certainly hope to see one.

We noticed one trend across Canada in early-2025: Most promotions' main champions—aside from NSPW's Travis Toxic—successfully defended their titles to start the year. In Moncton, New Brunswick, **Dylan Davis** kept his North Pro title against **Chip Chambers**. In the nation's capital, Ottawa, **Evil Uno** defeated **Alexia Nicole** to retain his C*4 title. In Toronto, **Jessie V** was victorious over **TARIK** to keep the Superkick'D title. (V has been champion for almost two years now.)

Out West in Winnipeg, WPW champion **James Roth** held onto his title against **Scott Ripley The Third**. In Edmonton, RCW Canadian heavyweight champion **Tony Machete** won a huge four-way title match against **Cody Mac**, **Kato**, and **Shaun Martens**. And in Vancouver, NEW champion **Sebastian Wolfe** beat **Marty Royale** to keep his 200-plus-day reign alive.

An interesting trivia note from our friends at Wrestlenomics: Alberta native **Bobby Sharp** was Canada's workhorse in January, with a total of 16 matches across four different promotions. The 36-year-old was the country's fourth-most-active wrestler in 2024. Edmonton's Shaun Martens dominated that category last year, as he wrestled an astonishing 190 times in Canada—more than doubling what the leaders of both WWE and AEW did for the same period of time.

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO BE A WORLD CHAMPION?



MACHO MAN

MACHO MADNESS

REAL BELTS

HAND CRAFTED

Prove you belong in the MAIN EVENT!

Be the champion you know you are!

We make the same spec belts as you see on T.V.

Be a champion and own a REAL BELT from MAIN EVENT BELTS.

On 03/27/25 Main Event Belts will release 25 of the highly anticipated officially licensed, limited-edition, Macho Man Randy Savage legacy championship belts. Only 25 will be made, ever! Scan the QR code below or visit our website, www.maineventbelts.com for more information.

MAIN EVENT BELTS have made titles for many SUPERSTARS including :
FTR, THE YOUNG BUCKS, JAKE “THE SNAKE” ROBERTS, BIG VAN VADER, DDP, JERRY “THE KING” LAWLER, HARLEY RACE, JIM CORNETTE, DEMOLITION and more.

We have made championships for promotions around the globe & can been seen on WWE’s Most Wanted Treasures, NJPW, DSOTR, PWG, REV-PRO etc.
We have various different belts available. Dont miss out on owning a REAL belt.
Original. Authentic. Officially Licensed.
MAIN EVENT BELTS - “Where professionals get their championships”

Contact us - maineventbelts@gmail.com

maineventbelts.com

THE FINISH

ARENA REPORTS **72** | THE WAY IT WAS **76**
OFFICIAL WRESTLING RATINGS **78** | DRAWING BLOOD **82**

TOMOHIRO ISHII lays a chop into **GABE KIDD** during their recent STRONG openweight title bout at NJPW's Battle in the Valley. "Arena Reports" has more photos—along with full results—from the show.

Photograph by **ISSA MARIE**

From local independents to the largest stages, here's the latest roundup of live event results. Got a report you'd like to share? Send to pwiresults@yahoo.com (and please do your best to mirror the format used here).

SPOTLIGHT CARD OF THE MONTH

CALIFORNIA

SAN JOSE—NJPW Battle in the Valley at San Jose Civic Center: **Zane Jay** beat **Viento** by submission ... **Bad Dude Tito** & **Shane Haste** defeated **Fred Rosser** & **Matt Vandagriff** ... STRONG openweight champion **Gabe Kidd** wrestled **Tomohiro Ishii** to a time-limit draw to retain the title ... STRONG openweight tag team champions **Jorel Nelson** & **Royce Isaacs** defeated **Rocky Romero** & **YOH** to retain ... **HANAKO**, **Maika**, **Mina Shirakawa**, & **Viva Van** beat **Anna Jay**, **AZM**, **Johnnie Robbie**, & **Trish Adora** in an elimination match ... TV champion **El Phantasmo** wrestled **Jeff Cobb** to a double-countout to retain ... **Hiromu Takahashi**, **Mayu Iwatani**, & **Yuka Sakazaki** defeated **EVIL**, **SHO**, & **Sumie Sakai** ... NEVER openweight champion **Konosuke Takeshita** pinned **KUSHIDA** to retain ... **Zack Sabre Jr.** pinned **Hechicero** ... IWGP junior heavyweight champion **El Desperado** pinned **Taiji Ishimori** to retain. (01-11-25)

—Spotlight photos by Issa Marie

Mat specialist Sumie Sakai enters the ring for her long-awaited retirement match—a six-person intergender bout that saw her team with EVIL and SHO.

ARIZONA

PHOENIX—American Warrior Wrestling Alliance at Bullshooters Billiards & Sports Bar: **Pop Chulo** pinned **Donny Palmer** ... **Cameron Walker** pinned **Johan Nara** ... **Tecelote** pinned AWWA Global champion **Johnny Saovi** to win the title ... **Capane** defeated Traditional Wrestling Entertainment heavyweight champion **Ramrock** in a Last Man Standing match to win the title ... **Vikram** pinned AWWA heavyweight champion **El Lycan** to win the title ... **Smoke Signals** defeated Cornerman tag team champions **Sensational Heat** in a ladder match to win the title ... **Kay Davver** beat **Maria James** by submission ... **Eliza Haze** defeated **Panda Moanyum** and AWWA Women's champion **Sassi** in a triple-threat to win the title. (01-17-25)

—Christopher Behrens

GEORGIA

FAYETTEVILLE—ACTION Wrestling at the Line Creek Bus Barn: **Sean Campbell** pinned **Grayson Pierce** ... **Mortar** defeated **Kasey Owens** ... **Joey Hyder** defeated **Anakin Murphy** ... **Jamesen Shook** & **Pha'Nesse** beat **Suge D** & **Tyler Stevens** by DQ ... **Adam Priest** pinned **Dillon McQueen** ... **Big Dave** beat **Moses** ... ACTION champion **Tim Bosby** defeated **Rob Killjoy** to retain. (01-24-25)

—Matt Griffin

SAVANNAH—Coastal Empire Wrestling at VFW Post 660 ... **Suge D** pinned **Hawk Thomas** ... **Tommy Mars** & **Nikki Eight** defeated **Sheriff David Rains** and **Chad Skywalker** in a three-way bout ... CEW Chaos champion **Hakeem Young** pinned **Cam Jackson** to retain the title ... **Alex Kane** pinned **Grayson Pierce** ... CEW Tag Team Turmoil champions **Cornelius Pepperbottom** & **Zach Mosley** defeated **Karl Hager** & **CJ Shine** to retain the title ... CEW heavyweight champion **Randall Reno III** pinned **Michael Walker** to retain the title. (01-18-25)

—Brett Wolverton

ILLINOIS

GODFREY—Midwest Wrestling Coalition at the Alton-Wood River Sportsmen's Club: **Glenn Williams** defeated **Mike Maverick** in a streetfight ... **Jose El Magnifico** beat **Johnny Joe Black** ... **Jayson Breed** & **Cole Stevens** defeated **Joey O'Riley** & **Rip Ravage** to become the inaugural tag team champions ... **Lillith Khan** beat **Madi Monarch** to become the inaugural Women's champion ... **Josh Totten** defeated **Attila Khan** to become the inaugural Coalition champion ... **Curt Gannon** beat **Mario Pardua** to become the inaugural heavyweight champion

In the evening's main event, El Desperado and Taiji Ishimori waged war for 20-plus minutes over the IWGP junior heavyweight crown.

Hiromu Takahashi, with the help of Stardom's Mayu Iwatani and AEW/TJPW's Yuka Sakazaki, pins Sumie Sakai in her final ring outing.

... **Yabo** & **Ruffo The Clown** defeated **Rocco The Barbarian** & **Salem Guest** in a Tag Team Funhouse Match.

(01-11-25)
—Patrick Brandmeyer

IOWA

IOWA CITY—SCWPro at Wildwood Smokehouse and Saloon: **Dante Leon** defeated **Malik Champion** ... **Lonzo Romero** defeated **James Thomas**, **Dominik Zagreus**, **Jared Thumb**, and **JT Energy** in a five-way bout ... **Brandon Becker** beat **Ript Studwell** ... **Johnny Wisdom** defeated **Augustus Draven** ... SCWPro Iowa champion **John Bonhart** defeated **Corn Boi** to retain ... **Dustan Moseley** beat **Jack Reaper** ... **Shane Hollister** defeated **Carlos Oliva** ... Tag team champions **Calvin Kelly** & **Cash Kennedy** beat **Casey Jax** & **Tigre Amore** in a ladder match to retain.

(01-18-25)
—Alex McCarthy

MAINE

YARMOUTH—Limitless Wrestling at Yarmouth Amvets: **Aaron Rourke** pinned **Blake Christian** ... **Aiden Aggro** defeated **Anthony Greene** ... **Gabby Forza** defeated **Tiara James** ... **Ricky Smokes** & **Brad Baylor** beat **Jermaine Marbury** & **Milo Mirra** ... **Delmi Exo** defeated **Ashley Vox** in a Last Sister Standing match ... **Alec Price** pinned **Zak Patterson** ... **1 Called Manders** defeated **TJ Crawford** ... **Channing Thomas** beat Limitless Wrestling champion **Dezmond Cole** to win the title.

(01-18-25)
—Randy Carver

MICHIGAN

ANN ARBOR—Independence Pro Wrestling at Homes Campus: **Elijah Eros** won a rumble match ... **LaDon Sanders** pinned **Nate Kobain** ... Women's champion **Stella Buho** defeated **Mackenzie Black** and **Lil' Missy** in a three-way bout ... **The Dark Gentleman** pinned **Remnar Gundlach** ... **Julius Iscariot** defeated **J Lee** by referee stoppage ... **Chris Malvado** & **Ominous Ramirez** defeated **Mondo Real** & **Max Morrison** ... **Jimmy Shalwin** pinned **Durag** ... **Big Jorge** pinned **Chris Moore** ... Michiana champion **Anderson Knight** pinned **Elijah Eros** to retain.

(01-19-25)
—Leonard Brand

MISSOURI

ST. LOUIS—Glory Pro Wrestling at Delmar Hall: **Cordell Cain** pinned **Ashton Reacher** ... **Tootie Lynn** defeated **Mackenzie Morgan** ... United Glory tag team champions **Jake Bosche** & **Scott Stanley** beat **Dominic Garrini** & **Kevin Ku** to retain ... **Ethan Price** pinned **Tyler Jordan** ... Women's Crown champion **Laynie Luck** defeated **Blair Onyx** to retain ... **Mat Fitchett** beat **Dan The Dad** ... **Marcus Muncherson** pinned **Dante Pharaoh** ... **Mike Outlaw** & **Dak Draper** defeated **The Deliverer Moses** & **Rahim De La Suede** ... Alpha-1 Zero Gravity champion **Kody Lane** beat Crown Of Glory champion **Jake Parnell** in a title-vs.-title match to retain his title and win the Crown Of Glory title.

(01-04-25)
—Patrick Brandmeyer

NEW JERSEY

RIDGEFIELD PARK—Pro Wrestling Junkie at the Knights of Columbus: **Emily Jaye** defeated **Brittnie Brooks**, **Eden Grey**, and **Gabby Forza** in a four-way bout ... **Jackson Drake** pinned **Anthony Greene** in a Strong Style Match ... **Deonna Purrazzo** beat **Hyan** and **Zayda Steel** in a triple-threat ... **Justin Finn** pinned **Nick Gage** ... **Dutch** & **Vincent** defeated **Dustin Waller** & **Kylon King** ... **Marcus Mathers** beat **Trevor Lee** ... **Charles Mason** defeated **Steve Maclin** to become the inaugural PWJ champion.

(01-26-25)
—Matt Brock

RIDGEFIELD PARK—Pro Wrestling Magic at the Phil Sheridan Building: **Juni Underwood** & **Ricky Pryce** beat **Deviant** & **Jackyl** ... **Tiffani Avatar** beat **Journey Burke** ... Junior heavyweight champion **Troy Locke** defeated **Vi**

IWGP heavyweight titlist Zack Sabre Jr. slaps an abdominal stretch on Hechicero. These two technicians have put on Match of the Year contenders for CMLL, RevPro, and now NJPW.

Daniel to retain ... Dark Arts champion **Steve Pena** beat **Bruno El Oso Blanco** by submission to retain ... **Dave McCall** & **Nate Wallace** defeated tag team champions **Wrecking Ball Legursky** & **Kerr** to win the title ... **Ruthless LaLa** beat **Cosmic** ... Heavyweight champion **Alex Reiman** defeated **Crowbar** to retain ... **Smiley** won the Chad Adams Memorial Rumble.

(01-18-25)
—David Valentin

NEW YORK

NEW YORK—Game Changer Wrestling "The People Vs. GCW" at Hammerstein Ballroom: **1 Called Manders** defeated **Blake Christian**, **Fuego Del Sol**, **Marcus Mathers**, **Mr. Danger**, and **Rich Swann** in a six-person scramble ... **PCO** won the pre-show rumble, last eliminating **Shane Mercer** ... **Matt Tremont** defeated **Brandon Kirk**, **Ciclope**, **Dr. Redacted**, **Drew Parker**, **John Wayne Murdoch**, **Matthew Justice**, **Rina Yamashita**, and GCW Extreme champion **Maki Itoh** in a Doors, Ladders, and Chairs unification match for the vacant GCW Ultraviolent title ... **EFFY** defeated **Allie Katch** by ref stoppage ... **Amazing Red**, **Grim Reefer**, & **Homicide** defeated **Griffin McCoy**, **Kerry Morton**, & **Tony Deppen** ... **Alec Price** & **Cole Radrick** beat GCW tag team champions **Dominic Garrini** & **Kevin Ku** to win the title ... **Charles Mason** beat **Richard Holliday** in a steel cage match ... **Sidney Akeem** beat **Hijo Del Vikingo** ... **Arez**, **Gringo Loco**, & **Jack Cartwheel** defeated **Little Guido**, **Super Crazy**, & **Tajiri** ... **Josh Barnett** beat **Tom Pestock** in a Bloodsport match ... **Megan Bayne** pinned **Atticus Cogar** ... **Joey Janela** pinned **Masato Tanaka** ... **Matt Cardona** pinned **Tommy Invincible** ... Matt Cardona pinned **MicroMan** ... **Jimmy Lloyd** pinned Matt Cardona ... EFFY pinned GCW champion **Mance Warner** to win the title.

(01-19-25)
—Matt Brock

TV champion El Phantasmo takes a free flight across the ring, courtesy of Jeff Cobb Airlines.

KUSHIDA keeps the larger, more powerful Konosuke Takeshita close to the mat during his bid for the NEVER openweight championship.

POUGHKEEPSIE—Awesome Championship Wrestling "Poughkeepsie Rumble" at the MJ Nesheiwat Convention Center: NWA junior heavyweight champion **Alex Taylor** defeated **GKM** and **Real1** in a three-way bout to retain ... **Little Guido**, **Zack Clayton**, & **Ray Jaz** defeated **Danny Doring**, **Landon Hale**, & **Dante Casanova** ... **Crowbar** pinned **Anthony Greene** ... **Kelly Madan** pinned **Tiara James** ... **Tommy Dreamer** defeated **Thom Latimer** by DQ ... **Hale Collins** & **Vik Dalishus** defeated **Danny Maff** & **Shawn Donovan** in a tables match ... **Richard Holliday** won the 20-Man Poughkeepsie Rumble to become the inaugural ACW heavyweight champion ... **Nic Nemeth** pinned **Matt Riddle**.

(01-04-25)
—Jennifer Heering

NORTH CAROLINA

MORGANTON—North American Wrestling Alliance at the Burke County Fairgrounds ... **Carolina Dreamer**, **David Sellers**, & **Tucker Rhodes** defeated **Myric Moore**, **FAFO**, & **Dugat** ... **Vinnie Valentine** defeated **Luke Fury**, **Max Carnage**, & **Asher Reign** in a fatal four-way match ... **Justin Kindred-Allen**, **Mason Allen**, **Robert Allen**, & **Steve Allen** defeated **Zay Vega**, **Dusty Money**, **Thomas Extreme**, & **Jett Morris** ... **The Silver Fox** pinned NAWA heavyweight champion **Big Donnie** to win the title ... Justin Kindred-Allen, Mason Allen, Robert Allen, & Steve Allen eliminated Big Donnie to win a Bunkhouse Battle Royal.

(01-19-25)
—Brett Wolverton

OHIO

YOUNGSTOWN—Real Action Pro Wrestling at Ohio Urban Renaissance Center: **Jimmy Jammer**, **Big Daddy Kage**, & **Blackhawk** beat **Vinnie Maverick**, **Collin Crew**, & **DLA** ... Wild Card champion **Jeff Meekins** beat **Draven Post** to retain ... Heritage champion **Sean Reznikk** defeated **Christian Saint** to retain ... **Mr. Krowly** & **Backwoods Zook** beat **Levi Masterson** & **RJ Jonesie** ... **Klub X-treme** defeated tag team champions **The LA Gunz** in a Bar Fight to win the title ... **Jimmy James** beat Social Media champion **Kip Paige** to win the title ... RAPW champion **Dior Castro** defeated **Ray Stewart** to retain.

(01-18-25)
—Johnny James

Gabe Kidd finds one of his toughest challenges to date in Tomohiro Ishii, whose head and neck are seemingly capable of withstanding endless punishment.

PENNSYLVANIA

PHILADELPHIA—Labor of Love at God's Auto Body: **Sazzy Boatright** defeated **Nahir Robles** ... **Hallowicked** defeated **Billy Avery** ... **Shea McCoy** & **Weber Hatfield** beat **Baliyan Akki & Mei Suruga** ... **Allie Katch** and **Emi Sakura** defeated Hallowicked.

(01-17-25)
—Liz Hunter

TENNESSEE

RED BANK—ICW No Holds Barred at the TWE Arena: **Malcolm Monroe III** pinned **Anakin Murphy** ... **Payton Blair** pinned **Lizzy Blair** ... **Tommy Vendetta** pinned **Hoodfoot** ... **Bobby Beverly** pinned **Gary Jay** ... **Dr. Redacted** pinned **Jamesen Shook** ... **Otis Cogar** pinned **Dale Patricks** ... American Death Match champion **Atticus Cogar** pinned **Tank** to retain.

(01-03-25)
—Leonard Brand

VERMONT

BARRE—Green Mountain Wrestling at Barre Elks Lodge #1535: **Jobz** pinned **Brahim Haddadi** ... **Sigma** & **Don Freeze** defeated **Abed Arroniz** & **Joe Krule** ... **Owen Brody** defeated **Ryan Mooney** and **Athan Promise** in a triple-threat ... **Ryan Ryzz** & **Miles Penn** beat **Diego Alvarez** & **Lex Lozano** and **Corey Jackson** & **Ting Shi** in a triple-threat tag team match ... **Johnny Pierce** wrestled **BA Tatum** to a double-countout ... **Spike Nishimura** defeated **Journey Burke** and **Selena Hekate** in a triple-threat ... **Mike Skyros** beat **Juni Underwood** by submission.

(01-19-25)
—Adam Lash

WASHINGTON

SEATTLE—DEFY Wrestling at Washington Hall: DEFY champion **KENTA** defeated **Schaff** to retain ... **Judas Icarus** & **Travis Williams** beat tag team champions **Gringo Loco** & **Arez** to win the title ... **Joey Janela** defeated **Cody Chhun** ... **Truth Magnum** & **Turbo Floyd** defeated **Ricky Gibson** & **Eddie Pearl** ... **Viva Van** beat **Nicole Matthews**, **Amira**, **Sandra Moone**, and **Megan Bayne** in a five-way bout ... **Marcus Mathers** defeated **Evan Rivers** ... **The Bollywood Boyz** defeated **Super Crazy** & **Sonico**.

(12-29-24)
—Matt Farmer

WEST VIRGINIA

KEYSER—Elite Pro Wrestling Alliance at the Indie on Main Theatre: **Jason Radatz** beat **Troy Thunder** ... **Professor Jakob Edwinn** pinned **Hunter Price** ... **TJay Sykes** defeated **KP McGregor** ... **Shane Malice**, **Dallas Riggs**, **Ryan Lee**, & **Blackhawk** beat **JJ Grizzly**, **Andrew Stevens**, **Cooper Lark**, & **Bo Steele** ... **DB Rivera** defeated **Gavin Miller** ... **Mason Walls** pinned **Andrew Thompson** ... **Reggie Collins** & **Cizzko** defeated **Israel Sharif Phakur** & **Yi-Pak Choi**.

(12-28-24)
—Tim Walker

CANADA

ONTARIO

DRYDEN—Canadian Wrestling's Elite at The Centre: Heavyweight champion **Mentallo** pinned **Bobby Sharp** ... **Danny Duggan** pinned **Tyson Hiller** ... **Eugene** & **Jimmy Jacobs** defeated **Derek** & **Danny Diggler** ... **Kevin Cannon** pinned **EZ Ryder** ... Central Canadian champion **Camikaze** defeated **AJ Sanchez** in a steel cage match.

(01-13-25)
—Leonard Brand

And now, your moment of zen: Yuka Sakazaki clocks SHO with the wrench the House of Torture member so often uses to win matches.

THE UNSUNG PIONEER

PWI's resident historian remembers **BOBBY DAVIS**, one of the most influential managers in wrestling history.

Bobby Davis' youthful looks and cocky attitude made him a favorite of wrestling magazine publishers in the 1950s and 1960s. FROM THE VAULT

TYPICALLY, WHEN THE topic of "greatest managers of all-time" is brought up, there are common names that are mentioned time and time again: Bobby "The Brain" Heenan, Jim Cornette, Paul Heyman, Capt. Lou Albano, "Classy" Freddie Blassie, The Grand Wizard, Gary Hart, and a few others. All very worthy names, to be sure. All with a claim to being on a list like that. And yet, more often than not, there's a major name that's left off that list; someone who helped to establish the very role we think of as the modern wrestling manager, but who walked away from the business so long ago that he's before the living memory of the vast majority of fans today. That person is Bobby Davis.

Once a darling of wrestling magazines—thanks to his youthful looks, cocky attitude, and brash demeanor—Davis managed some of the best of the best. This was particularly true from the late-1950s through most of the 1960s. And much of that work was done in the Northeast for the Capitol Wrestling Corporation/WWWF, the company today known as WWE.

In fact, Davis was one of the top favorites of a very young Vincent K. McMahon, equal in stature to Dr. Jerry Graham—one of the chief wrestling stars that Bobby happened to manage. He was recognized last year in the most recent crop of inductees to the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* Hall of Fame, an accolade that was grossly overdue in the estimation of many a wrestling reporter (including this one).

There had been wrestling managers before Bobby Davis, at least in the strictest sense of the term. Jim Londos had Ed White; Ed "Strangler" Lewis famously had Billy Sandow; and Lewis himself served as a manager/mentor figure to Lou Thesz in later years. But these men were not "wrestling managers" in the sense that we think of today. They were not television characters. They were not heat-seekers designed

to get a crowd riled up, to speak for their proteges, and to play a key role in promoting upcoming matches. No, Bobby Davis helped to invent that. Along with another early wrestling manager, "Wild" Red Berry, he essentially created so many of the tropes we think of today. He specialized in being the arrogant-yet-cowardly blowhard, the snazzily attired young hooligan who hid behind his men and cheated every chance he got. That's a wrestling manager, as we think of them today. And that was Bobby Davis.

A son of Columbus, Ohio, Davis cut his teeth as a teenaged wrestler back in the 1950s in the territory once run by the venerable old Al Haft. But much like his namesake Bobby Heenan a few years later, this Bobby wasn't really cut out to be a full-time wrestler. He found a much more favorable niche for himself as a different kind of wrestling character. He first barnstormed into the Northeast as the manager of "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers, whom he took all the way to the NWA World heavyweight title. Among his other proteges were the fabled Golden Grahams, Eddie and Dr. Jerry; Bob Orton Sr.; Johnny Valentine; "Handsome" Johnny Barend; and even a young Gorilla Monsoon, whom Davis first helped bring to the WWWF in the summer of 1963.

I had long been fascinated by Bobby and his important wrestling legacy, and so I once sought him out. He had more or less disappeared from the wrestling scene after the 1960s, getting into the Wendy's fast food franchising business on the ground floor and making his fortune there. In fact, that's what would later cause his name to fade from the pantheon of old-school wrestling legends in later generations. He didn't need wrestling.

After years of searching, I finally managed to get him on the phone in 2020, in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. He was not in the greatest health, but was pleased to talk about his astounding career—as he had also been doing, I found out, with other wrestling historians and admirers. These included Tim Hornbaker and Sidney Bakabella, an indie manager who wanted to glean all he could from the master.

This picture, taken in 1988, was sent to our offices by Davis himself. By that time, the pioneering manager had left behind the world of wrestling to become a successful restaurateur—although he never lost his memories of the "good old days."

FROM THE VAULT

I was able to fulfill my dream of interviewing Bobby Davis. And I made that interview available on the internet to the best of my ability, to remind everyone of what an important figure Bobby Davis was—how so many of our favorite wrestling managers of later years had taken so much from him, whether directly or indirectly. Sadly, he did not live much longer, and so we were only able to have a few conversations. But it was a pleasure to listen to his stories, to hear him come out of his shell and shake off the bonds of age and infirmity to briefly become the cocky Bobby Davis of old, for just a few minutes on the telephone.

I, along with many others, was thrilled when Dave Meltzer placed Bobby on the ballot for the *WON* Hall of Fame in an attempt to rectify a great historical wrong. And after a few years of voting for him, I was relieved when he finally made it in, gaining recognition for all he had done to pioneer the role of the heel pro wrestling manager. Perhaps now there will be others, inspired by seeing his name among the Hall-of-Famers, who will seek out information and try to learn more about him and his contributions.

Before the Unholy Trinity of Blassie, Albano, and The Wiz terrorized the (W)WWF of the 1970s and early-'80s, it was Davis and other early managers like Red Berry who represented the first wave, creating the template that is still followed to this day, several generations later. Like his most famous charge, Buddy Rogers, Davis was a one-of-a-kind character who owned any room he walked into. He never lost that swagger that once made him so famous ... and so infamous. I can personally testify to that.

FOR PERIOD ENDED FEBRUARY 9, 2025

The top singles wrestlers, tag teams, and more are ranked and dissected.

HEAVYWEIGHT

1. **CODY RHODES**
   (1) WWE Undisputed Universal champion
   Atlanta, GA
2. **GUNTHER**
   (2) WWE World heavyweight champion
   Vienna, Austria
3. **JEY USO**
   (-) 2025 Men's Royal Rumble winner
   San Francisco, CA
4. **JON MOXLEY**
   (3) AEW World champion
   Cincinnati, OH
5. **ZACK SABRE JR.**
   (4) IWGP World heavyweight champion
   Isle of Sheppey, U.K.
6. **JOE HENDRY**
   (-) TNA World champion
   Edinburgh, Scotland
7. **OZAWA**
   (-) GHC heavyweight champion
   Shizuoka, Japan
8. **BRON BREAKKER**
   (8) WWE Intercontinental champion
   Atlanta, GA
9. **JUN SAITO**
   (-) AJPW Triple Crown champion
   Miyagi, Japan
10. **MATT RIDDLE**
    (-) MLW World champion
    Las Vegas, NV

WOMEN

1. **RHEA RIPLEY**
   (-) WWE Women's World champion
   Adelaide, South Australia
2. **TIFFANY STRATTON**
   (-) WWE Women's champion
   Prior Lake, MN
3. **CHARLOTTE FLAIR**
   (-) 2025 Women's Royal Rumble winner
   Charlotte, NC
4. **MASHA SLAMOVICH**
   (2) TNA Knockouts World champion
   Moscow, Russia
5. **MARIAH MAY**
   (5) AEW Women's World champion
   London, U.K.
6. **SAYA KAMITANI**
   (-) World of Stardom champion
   Kanagawa, Japan
7. **ATHENA**
   (7) ROH Women's World champion
   Dallas, TX
8. **MERCEDES MONE**
   (8) AEW TBS/NJPW STRONG Women's champion
   Boston, MA
9. **LIV MORGAN**
   (1) Former WWE Women's World champion
   Elmwood Park, NJ
10. **NIA JAX**
    (3) Former WWE Women's champion
    San Diego, CA

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

JUN SAITO

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

SAYA KAMITANI

WWE RAW MEN

GUNTHER
(C) Vienna, Austria

1–JEY USO *(-) San Francisco, CA*
2–BRON BREAKKER *(1) Atlanta, GA*
3–CM PUNK *(-) Chicago, IL*
4–PENTA *(-) Mexico City, Mexico*
5–SETH ROLLINS *(3) Davenport, IA*

SMACKDOWN MEN

CODY RHODES
(C) Atlanta, GA

1–SHINSUKE NAKAMURA *(1) Kyoto, Japan*
2–LA KNIGHT *(2) Las Vegas, NV*
3–CARMELO HAYES *(3) Worcester, MA*
4–ANDRADE *(4) Gomez Palacio, Mexico*
5–KEVIN OWENS *(-) Marieville, QC*

AEW MEN

JON MOXLEY
(C) Cincinnati, OH

1– KONOSUKE TAKESHITA *(1) Osaka, Japan*
2–KAZUCHIKA OKADA *(-) Aichi, Japan*
3–DANIEL GARCIA *(2) Buffalo, NY*
4–WILL OSPREAY *(-) Essex, U.K.*
5–KENNY OMEGA *(-) Winnipeg, MB*

TNA MEN

JOE HENDRY
(3) Edinburgh, Scotland

1–MOOSE *(1) Atlanta, GA*
2–NIC NEMETH *(C) Hollywood, FL*
3–MIKE SANTANA *(2) New York, NY*
4–JAKE SOMETHING *(-) Midland, MI*
5–FRANKIE KAZARIAN *(5) Anaheim, CA*

NJPW

ZACK SABRE JR.
(C) Isle of Sheppey, U.K.

1–HIROOKI GOTO *(-) Mie, Japan*
2–YOTA TSUJI *(-) Kanagawa, Japan*
3–EL DESPERADO *(-) Niigata, Japan*
4–EL PHANTASMO *(-) Vancouver, B.C.*
5–GABE KIDD *(-) Nottingham, U.K.*

WWE RAW WOMEN

RHEA RIPLEY
(2) Adelaide, South Australia

1–LYRA VALKYRIA *(3) Dublin, Ireland*
2–LIV MORGAN *(C) Elmwood Park, NJ*
3–IYO SKY *(1) Tokyo, Japan*
4–DAKOTA KAI *(4) Auckland, New Zealand*
5–ZOEY STARK *(-) Las Vegas, NV*

SMACKDOWN WOMEN

TIFFANY STRATTON
(4) Prior Lake, MN

1–CHELSEA GREEN *(1) Victoria, BC*
2–NIA JAX *(C) San Diego, CA*
3–MICHIN *(2) Los Angeles, CA*
4–NAOMI *(-) Orlando, FL*
5–BIANCA BELAIR *(5) Knoxville, TN*

AEW WOMEN

MARIAH MAY
(C) London, U.K

1–MERCEDES MONE *(1) Boston, MA*
2– TONI STORM *(-) Auckland, New Zealand*
3–JULIA HART *(-) Bloomington, MN*
4–KRIS STATLANDER *(-) Long Island, NY*
5–JAMIE HAYTER *(-) Southampton, U.K.*

TNA KNOCKOUTS

MASHA SLAMOVICH
(5) Moscow, Russia

1–TESSA BLANCHARD *(-) Charlotte, NC*
2–SAVANNAH EVANS *(-) Charlotte, NC*
3–CORA JADE *(-) Chicago, IL*
4–ASH BY ELEGANCE *(2) Cleveland, OH*
5–ROSEMARY *(1) Winnipeg, MB*

STARDOM

SAYA KAMITANI
(5) Kanagawa, Japan

1–STARLIGHT KID *(-) Kanagawa, Japan*
2–TAM NAKANO *(C) Aichi, Japan*
3–MAYU IWATANI *(2) Yamaguchi, Japan*
4–MIYU AMASAKI *(-) Kyoto, Japan*
5–MOMO WATANABE *(-) Kanagawa, Japan*

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Jason McVeigh, Kristen Ashly, Harry Burkett, Paul Pratt, and STRIGGA (Cagematch.net, Purolove.com). The numbers in parentheses indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.

TAG TEAM

1. **DIY**
   Johnny Gargano & Tommaso Ciampa
   (2) WWE tag team champions
2. **THE HARDYS**
   Matt & Jeff Hardy
   (9) TNA tag team champions
3. **BIANCA BELAIR & NAOMI**
   (-) WWE Women's tag team champions
4. **FRAXIOM**
   Axiom & Nathan Frazer
   (4) NXT tag team champions
5. **THE HURT SYNDICATE**
   Bobby Lashley & Shelton Benjamin
   (-) AEW World tag team champions
6. **SAITO BROTHERS**
   Jun & Rei Saito
   (1) All Japan tag team champions
7. **THE YOUNG BUCKS**
   Matthew & Nicholas Jackson
   (-) IWGP tag team champions
8. **WAR RAIDERS**
   Erik & Ivar
   (-) WWE World tag team champions
9. **WING☆GORI**
   Hanan & Saya Iida
   (7) Stardom tag team champions
10. **LOS HERMANOS CHAVEZ**
    Angel de Oro & Niebla Roja
    (10) CMLL World tag team champions

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

YOUNG BUCKS

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

MINA SHIRAKAWA

MOST POPULAR

1–JEY USO
2–CODY RHODES
3–HARLEY CAMERON
4–JOE HENDRY
5–CM PUNK
6–TONI STORM
7–RHEA RIPLEY
8–SWERVE STRICKLAND
9–MINA SHIRAKAWA
10–EFFY

MOST HATED

1–DOMINIK MYSTERIO
2–KEVIN OWENS
3–CHRIS JERICHO
4–TESSA BLANCHARD
5–LOGAN PAUL
6–THE DEATH RIDERS
7–LIV MORGAN
8–MERCEDES MONE
9–RICOCHET
10–MOOSE

MLW MEN

MATT RIDDLE
(1) Las Vegas, NV
1–MADS KRUGGER *(3) Unknown*
2–SATOSHI KOJIMA *(C) Tokyo, Japan*
3– DONOVAN DIJAK *(2) Worcester, MA*
4–KENTA *(4) Tokyo, Japan*
5–TOM LAWLOR *(-) Las Vegas, NV*

NWA MEN

THOM LATIMER
(C) Chesterfield, U.K.
1– CARSON BARTHOLOMEW DRAKE *(-) Cincinnati, OH*
2–ALEX TAYLOR *(-) Gallatin, TX*
3–MIMS *(1) Clarksville, TN*
4–SILAS MASON *(4) Blount County, TN*
5–JEREMIAH PLUNKETT *(-) Tater Peeler, TN*

NXT MEN

OBA FEMI
(2) Lagos, Nigeria
1–TONY D'ANGELO *(1) Chicago, IL*
2–TRICK WILLIAMS *(C) Columbia, SC*
3–LEXIS KING *(-) Cincinnati, OH*
4–EDDY THORPE *(-) Reno, NV*
5–ETHAN PAGE *(5) Hamilton, ON*

ROH MEN

CHRIS JERICHO
(C) Winnipeg, MB
1–KOMANDER *(-) Reynosa, Mexico*
2–LEE MORIARTY *(3) Pittsburgh, PA*
3–LEE JOHNSON *(5) Gary, IN*
4–BRIAN CAGE *(1) Chico, CA*
5–KATSUYORI SHIBATA *(-) Mie, Japan*

AAA MEN

ALBERTO EL PATRON
(C) San Luis Potosi, Mexico
1–EL MESIAS *(2) Bayamon, PR*
2–LAREDO KID *(1) Nuevo Laredo, Mexico*
3– PSYCHO CLOWN *(-) Mexico City, Mexico*
4–CIBERNETICO *(-) Mexico*
5–HIJO DEL VIKINGO *(5) Puebla, Mexico*

MLW WOMEN

DELMI EXO
(1) Providence, RI
1–JANAI KAI *(C) Washington D.C.*
2–PERSEPHONE *(3) El Paso, TX*
3–LLUVIA *(4) Mexico City, Mexico*
4–MIYU YAMASHITA *(4) Fukuoka, Japan*
5–ALEJANDRA QUINTANILLA *(-) San Salvador, El Salvador*

NWA WOMEN

KENZIE PAIGE
(C) Sevierville, TN
1–BIG MAMA *(1) Cincinnati, OH*
2–HALEY J *(2) Unknown*
3–TIFFANY NIEVES *(3) New York, NY*
4–NATALIA MARKOVA *(1) Moscow, Russia*
5– RUTHIE JAY *(-) Port-Au-Prince, Haiti*

NXT WOMEN

GIULIA
(2) London, U.K.
1–FALLON HENLEY *(1) Chelsea, MI*
2–ROXANNE PEREZ *(C) Laredo, TX*
3–STEPHANIE VAQUER *(4) San Fernando, Chile*
4–SHOTZI *(-) Oakland, CA*
5–KARMEN PETROVIC *(-) Toronto, ON*

ROH WOMEN

ATHENA
(C) Dallas, TX
1–RED VELVET *(1) Miami, FL*
2–QUEEN AMINATA *(-) Guinea, West Africa*
3–BILLIE STARKZ *(-) Louisville, KY*
4–LEILA GREY *(-) New York, NY*
5–TRISH ADORA *(-) Washington, D.C.*

AAA WOMEN

FLAMMER
(C) Monterrey, Mexico
1–LA HIEDRA *(1) Nuevo Laredo, Mexico*
2–FABY APACHE *(2) Mexico City, Mexico*
3–CHIK TORMENTA *(3) Guadalajara, Mexico*
4–DALYS *(4) Panama City, Panama*
5–REINA DORADA *(5) Mexico City, Mexico*

RATINGS ANALYSIS

WHEN YOU LOOK down our Heavyweight and Women's Top 10 lists, you'll see the names of 20 talented individuals. These are—generally speaking—lists for the top singles champions in wrestling during a given time period. But to think that those singular names earned those positions all by themselves would be a disservice to the factions, alliances, and stables to which many of them belong.

On our Heavyweight Top 10 list, **Gunther (#2)** can thank Ludwig Kaiser for at least a little help in getting him to his current status within WWE, while **Jon Moxley (#4)** and **Zack Sabre Jr. (#5)** owe much to their respective factions for helping them cling to championship gold. On the Women's Top 10, the story is the same with **Liv Morgan (#9)**, **Nia Jax (#10)**, and **Athena (#7)** all proving to be more comfortable—and successful—when they have backup.

None of this diminishes the accomplishments of those names making our lists. Rather, it might even speak to the intelligence of several of them. In such a competitive and risky business, the best and highest-ranked wrestlers are quite often the ones who know that success is rarely achieved alone.

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

ALTHOUGH ZACK SABRE JR. CAN HANDLE HIS OWN BUSINESS AGAINST OPPONENTS LIKE HECHICERO, HE BENEFITS FROM THE RINGSIDE SUPPORT OF HIS TMDK RUNNING MATES.

CMLL MEN

GRAN GUERRERO
(C) Gomez Palacio, Mexico

1–MISTICO
(1) Mexico City, Mexico
2–TEMPLARIO
(2) Guadalajara, Mexico
3–AVERNO
(-) Mexico City, Mexico
4–GUERRERO MAYA JR.
(-) Atlixco, Mexico
5–STAR BLACK
(-) Guadalajara, Mexico

NOAH

OZAWA
(-) Shizuoka, Japan

1–GALENO DEL MAL
(-) Mexico City, Mexico
2–TETSUYA ENDO
(-) Miyagi, Japan
3–KAITO KIYOMIYA
(C) Saitama, Japan
4–EITA
(-) Nagano, Japan
5– MANABU SOYA
(1) Nagano, Japan

AJPW

JUN SAITO
(1) Miyagi, Japan

1–YUMA ANZAI
(4) Gunma, Japan
2– REI SAITO
(-) Miyagi, Japan
3–MUSASHI
(-) Iwate, Japan
4–YUMA AOYAGI
(-) Nagano, Japan
5–YUKO MIYAMOTO
(5) Hiroshima, Japan

INDEPENDENT

MARCUS MATHERS
(1) Philadelphia, PA

1–KRULE
(C) Unknown
2– MYSTERIOUS Q
(-) Houston, TX
3–ALFONSO GONZALEZ
(-) San Diego, CA
4–NEIL DIAMOND CUTTER
(4) Selby, SD
5–RYAN CLANCY
(-) New York

PROGRESS MEN

LUKE JACOBS
(C) Manchester, U.K.

1–TATE MAYFAIRS
(-) London, U.K.
2–LEON SLATER
(1) Bradford, U.K.
3–MAN LIKE DEREISS
(3) Birmingham, U.K.
4–MICHAEL OKU
(-) London, U.K.
5–RICKY KNIGHT JR.
(-) Norwich, U.K.

CMLL WOMEN

ZEUXIS
(C) San Juan, Puerto Rico

1–LLUVIA
(4) Mexico City, Mexico
2–PERSEPHONE
(2) El Paso, TX
3–DARK SILUETA
(-) Guadalajara, Mexico
4–LA CATALINA
(5) Santiago, Chile
5–SANELY
(1) Torreon, Mexico

TJPW

MIZUKI
(-) Kobe, Japan

1–SUZUME
(5) Ibaraki, Japan
2–HYPER MISAO
(-) Ibaraki, Japan
3–SHOKO NAKAJIMA
(-) Niigata, Japan
4–MIU WATANABE
(C) Saitama, Japan
5–RIKA TATSUMI
(-) Nagano, Japan

MARIGOLD

UTAMI HAYASHISHITA
(-) Kagoshima, Japan

1–MAI SAKURAI
(-) Chiba, Japan
2–VICTORIA YUZUKI
(-) Aichi, Japan
3–SAREEE
(C) Tokyo, Japan
4–BOZILLA
(4) Hanover, Germany
5– MIKU AONO
(1) Saitama, Japan

PAN-AFRIKAN

SUGE D
(C) Augusta, GA

1–JORDAN BLADE
(1) Richmond, VA
2–PAPA JACE
(2) Las Vegas, NV
3–EEL O'NEAL
(3) Baltimore, MD
4–SHELTON BENJAMIN
(4) Orangeburg, SC
5–BILLY DIXON
(5) New York, NY

PROGRESS WOMEN

NINA SAMUELS
(1) London, U.K.

1– RHIO
(C) Preston, U.K.
2–EMERSYN JAYNE
(2) Glasgow, Scotland
3–ALEXXIS FALCON
(-) Hull, U.K.
4–LANA AUSTIN
(-) Manchester, U.K.
5–RAYNE LEVERKUSEN
(3) London, U.K.

JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT

1. **EL DESPERADO**
(-) IWGP junior heavyweight champion
Niigata, Japan

2. **AVERNO**
(-) CMLL light heavyweight champion
Mexico City, Mexico

3. **LAREDO KID**
(3) AAA cruiserweight champion
Nuevo Laredo, Mexico

4. **MUSASHI**
(-) AJPW junior heavyweight champion
Iwate, Japan

5. **EITA**
(-) GHC junior heavyweight champion
Nagano, Japan

6. **DRAGON LEE**
(2) WWE Speed champion
Tala, Mexico

7. **YAMATO**
(7) Open the Brave Gate/Dream Gate champion
Iwate, Japan

8. **MISTICO**
(8) MLW World middleweight champion
Mexico City, Mexico

9. **IKUTO HIDAKA**
(9) BJW junior heavyweight champion
Shimane, Japan

10. **ALEX TAYLOR**
(10) NWA junior heavyweight champion
Gallatin, TX

WINNINGEST ROYAL RUMBLE ENTRANCE NUMBERS

1–#30
2–#27
3–#1
4–#24
5–#23
6–#19
7–#28
8–#22
9–#29
10–#2

PHOTO BY ISSA MARIE

EL DESPERADO

WRESTLERS WITH VERBS FOR NAMES

1–SWERVE STRICKLAND
2–TRICK WILLIAMS
3–ANDRE CHASE
4–SLICE BOOGIE
5–LASH LEGEND
HONORABLE MENTION: SAWYER WRECK

—Sent by Bert Killberg

TOP 10 WOMEN TAG TEAMS

1–BIANCA BELAIR & NAOMI
2–JODY THREAT & DANI LUNA
3–MAKI ITOH & MIYU YAMASHITA
4–HANAN & SAYA IIDA
5–HAZUKI & KOGUMA
6–ELLA ENVY & MISS STARR
7–TAM NAKANO, SAORI ANOU, & NATSUPOI
8–MOMO WATANABE & THEKLA
9–CHARITY KING & DANNI BEE
10–HARLEY HUDSON & LUCY SKY

—Sent by Ted Holland

DRAGONGATE: CHAMPION–YAMATO; **1**-Strong Machine J; **2**-KZY; **3**-Shun Skywalker; **4**-Kota Minoura; **5**-Ben-K

DDT: CHAMPION–Chris Brookes; **1**-Shuji Ishikawa; **2**-Yuki Ueno; **3**-MAO; **4**-Danshoku Dieno; **5**-Yuya Koroku

INSANE CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Kenny Williams; **1**-Landon Riley; **2**-Rhio; **3**-Kez Evans; **4**-Big Damo; **5**-Rampage Brown

OTT: CHAMPION–Big Damo; **1**-Charlie Sterling; **2**-Jay; **3**-B. Cool; **4**-LJ Cleary; **5**- Robbie X

REVOLUTION PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Michael Oku; **1**-Will Kaven; **2**-Luke Jacobs; **3**-Mascara Dorada.; **4**-Zozaya; **5**-Leon Slater

WXW: CHAMPION–Peter Tihanyi; **1**-Anita Vaughan; **2**-Mike D Vecchio; **3**-Bobby Gunns; **4**-Stephanie Maze; **5**-Fast Time Moodo

ACTION WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Tim Bosby; **1**-Big Dave; **2**-Adam Priest; **3**-Alex Kane; **4**-Bobby Flaco; **5**-Jaden Newman

DEFY WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Ricky Starks; **1**-KENTA; **2**-Nick Wayne; **3**-Cara Noir; **4**-Guillermo Rosas; **5**-Joey Janela

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING: CHAMPION–EFFY; **1**-Matt Tremont; **2**-Masha Slamovich; **3**-Jimmy Lloyd; **4**-Joey Janela; **5**-Matt Cardona

JUGGALO CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Willie Mack; **1**-2 Tuff Tony; **2**-Matt Cross; **3**-Kongo Kong; **4**-Caleb Konley; **5**-The Misfit

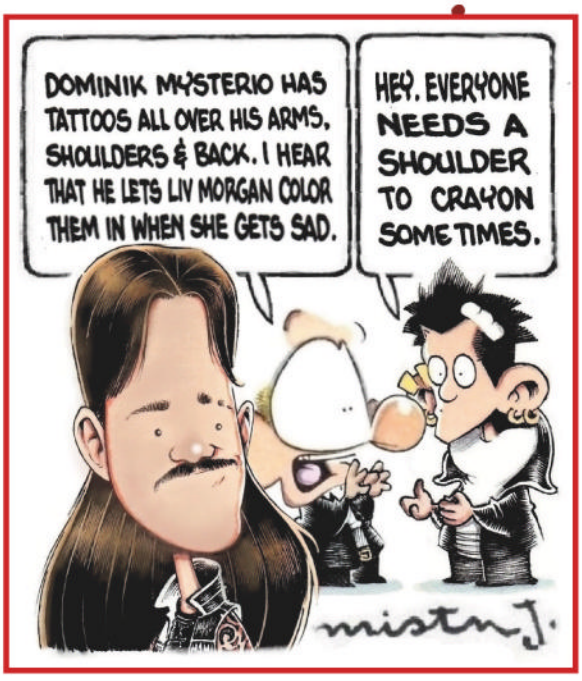
WORLD WRESTLING COUNCIL: CHAMPION–Intelecto 5 Estrellas; **1**-Mr. Big; **2**-Zcion RT1; **3**-JC Jexx; **4**-Ray Gonzalez; **5**-Pablo Marquez

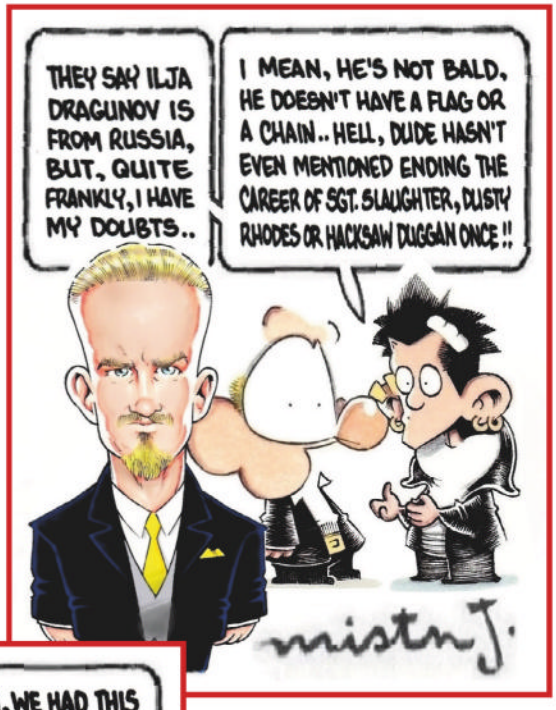
Want to be an honorary member of the *PWI* Ratings committee? Simply make a top 10 of your choosing, then email it to pwi@kappapublishing.com

Each issue, we'll include a reader submission or two. Have fun! And don't forget to include your name and hometown, so that we can credit you.

DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN


DOMINIK MYSTERIO HAS TATTOOS ALL OVER HIS ARMS, SHOULDERS & BACK. I HEAR THAT HE LETS LIV MORGAN COLOR THEM IN WHEN SHE GETS SAD.
HEY. EVERYONE NEEDS A SHOULDER TO CRAYON SOMETIMES.
mistnJ.


THEY SAY ILJA DRAGUNOV IS FROM RUSSIA, BUT, QUITE FRANKLY, I HAVE MY DOUBTS..
I MEAN, HE'S NOT BALD, HE DOESN'T HAVE A FLAG OR A CHAIN.. HELL, DUDE HASN'T EVEN MENTIONED ENDING THE CAREER OF SGT. SLAUGHTER, DUSTY RHODES OR HACKSAW DUGGAN ONCE!!
mistnJ.

NOW LOOK.. WHAT HAVE I SAID?! JUST BECAUSE HIS NAME IS "JUICY", DOESN'T MEAN HE WANTS YOU TO TRY AND..
I MEAN, WE HAD THIS EXACT SAME PROBLEM WITH "FRESHLY SQUEEZED" ORANGE CASSIDY NOW DIDN'T WE ?!?
mistnJ.

REMEMBER OUR WEEKLY PRINT NEWSLETTER?

May 25, 1992

Pro Wrestling Illustrated Weekly

JAPANESE

Former WCW televi
champion **The Great I**
one of the greatest aer
ists in the sport toda
returned to WCW.
In the Japanese
tion's first week h
took on an interes
ety of opponents.

IT'S BACK . . . IN DIGITAL FORM!
BEST OF ALL, IT'S 100% FREE!

Mail 11:30 AM Fri Apr 12

aA

prowrestlingillustrated.substack.com

99%

Pro Wrestling Illustrated

Subscribe Sign in

Home Archive About

PWI Weekly for April 8, 2024

That Email You Like Is Going To Come Back In Style

APR 8

1

Pro Wrestling Illustrated

PWI: The World's #1 Wrestling Magazine

Type your email... Subscribe

RECOMMENDATIONS

BIG EGG

Colette Arrand

, Double-Acts, And More

ss, Flashy Moves At 16

Every Monday morning, you'll get a dose of *PWI* right in your email inbox, with such recurring features as:

WRESTLER OF THE WEEK
SPOTLIGHT CARDS
MATT BROCK'S "MUSINGS"
PHOTOS "FROM THE VAULT"

. . . And More!

SUBSCRIBE NOW AT

prowrestlingillustrated.substack.com

THE BLOODLINE EDITION

WWE 2K25

AVAILABLE NOW

INCLUDES

The Bloodline Edition includes:

- The Bloodline Edition Bonus Pack
- WrestleMania 41 Pack (Available Summer 2025)*
- The Rock Nation of Domination Pack (not available for separate purchase).
- WWE 2K25 Ringside Pass
- Deadman Edition Bonus Pack*
- Wyatt Sicks Pack

TEEN T ESRB
Violence
Mild Blood
Mild Suggestive Themes
Language
Use of Alcohol
In-Game Purchases (Includes Random Items)
Users Interact

PS5 | PS4 XBOX SERIES X|S XBOX ONE STEAM

***Exact release date of the WrestleMania 41 Pack content, Mattel Elite "Greatest Hits" Undertaker and Usable Urn to be announced post-launch and subject to change.**

© 2025 Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. 2K and the 2K logo are trademarks of Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. All Rights Reserved. ™ & © 2025 WWE. All Rights Reserved. All WWE programming, talent names, images, likenesses, slogans, wrestling moves, trademarks, logos and copyrights are the exclusive property of WWE and its subsidiaries. All other marks and trade marks are the property of their respective owners.

2K